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ON REREADING CHAUCER

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On Rereading Chaucer

By

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TO MY SISTERS
EMILY AND ETHEL

Although his lyfe be queynt, the resembraunce
Of him hath in me so fressh lyflynesse,
That, to putte othir men in remembraunce
Of his persone, I have heere his lyknesse
Do make, to this ende in sothfastnesse,
That thei that have of him lest thought and mynde,
By this peynture may ageyn him fynde

THOMAS HOCCEVE, *The Regement of Princes*

PREFACE

In the present set of essays I attempt to give expression to some of the ideas I have had over the years about Chaucer's literary works. It may be noted that what I have here put down has occurred to me "on rereading Chaucer," and, I may now add, after rereading him many times. Even so I imagine some friendly enemy in the field of criticism taking a look at my pages and saying, "Let him read the poet once again!" The privilege happily remains for all of us. Many of my observations still remain tentative, and I may say that I am in favor of admitting tentative judgments, since they will encourage other readers to offer their differing views, the stimulation of disagreement will arise, and everyone will turn to the poet himself to confirm some statements or to refute others.

There is a certain lack of unity in this book, as I am well aware. In general my remarks are strung together on the theme of Chaucer's humor, but I have not hesitated to wander off to deal with some other subject if it seemed profitable for discussion. Moreover I have not defined my terms closely, and I have not been systematic enough to let the reader know fully what I mean by the humorous, the comic, the satiric. I suppose I have felt justified in assuming that most readers would have a fair idea of what I was driving at, and I have feared that if anyone got too close to my meaning he might be disposed to controversy. For the moment I have no objection to adopting George Meredith's defini-

tions, in what has been attacked as a very unsystematic essay, where he gives his explanation as follows: "The comic, which is the perceptive, is the governing spirit, awakening and giving aim to these powers of laughter, but it is not to be confounded with them; it enfolds a thinner form of them, differing from satire in not sharply driving into the quivering sensibilities, and from humor in not comforting them, and tucking them up, or indicating a broader than the range of this bustling world to them." Incidentally this note on the "comforting" power of humor might be broadened to include its general yield of the resources of strength. It is a healthy sense.

Meredith's own remarks on Chaucer are provocative. In speaking of the *Misanthrope* and *Tartuffe* he observes "They quicken the mind through laughter, from coming out of the mind . ." But earlier he has remarked: "The Comic Spirit is not hostile to the sweetest songfully poetic. Chaucer bubbles with it. Shakespeare overflows, there is a mild moon's ray of it (pale with super-refinement through distance from our flesh and blood planet) in *Comus*" Now some of this is apt enough. I recommend to students of Milton the reflections on the quality of his mirth. I am aware also that there is a nice indication here of the constant and spontaneous element in the flow of what the other two poets offer. But I cannot help a slight suspicion that Meredith was hardly aware of the extent to which Chaucer's mind (let alone Shakespeare's) functioned. What he says has the manner that comes from reading too much of a certain type of comment on Chaucer, the sort that dwells on his descriptions of Spring and the way the daisy looks in the fields. Take

for instance what Mr. Llewelyn Powys sets forth "Daisies! it was not for nothing that Chaucer selected that brave, contented, little English flower to be his especial favourite." Indeed it was not for nothing the sophisticated, allegorical purpose of the poet's use of this item can be found fully explained in any handbook. But there is little evidence that Chaucer bubbled His poetry, I think, has not worked in that way, even if it springs ultimately from a wine cellar; nor do I find his exhilaration always effervescent His humor is as quiet, although as active and intense, as sunlight It is natural, not produced A stream may bubble, but chiefly because of its interruptions. Chaucer's humor is less a flow of good spirits than an attitude of mind "a way of thinking, an attitude to life," as M. Cazamian describes it. Or rather it comes from the light of the man's whole personality.

Perhaps it is important nowadays to ask whether there is anything peculiarly national in Chaucer's variety of humor. M. Cazamian would claim something of his "slyness" for France and French influence. On the other hand, I am ready to see a German sense of grotesquery in such passages as his descriptions of the Miller, the Summoner, and the Cook, which commend themselves to the art of a Durer. But this problem I leave to others Humor is in part an international possession, and it is also, I hope, a universal solvent.

But did he ever suspend for a time the operation of this important sense? Some readers may find that he did in the story of Constance, or in that of Virginia, or even in the Prioress's Tale. In such cases I hardly think it was held in abeyance; it was simply not apropos, as it was not in the *Par-*

son's Tale. There is no evidence of that loss of a sense of proportion in these stories which we might expect to find if humor is deliberately withheld. Stories like monologues vary in content, and moods vary in color. Chaucer's luck in discovering most of his pilgrims at a special moment of self-revelation has been noticed by a better critic elsewhere, and such performances as those by the Pardoner and the Wife of Bath and the Canon's Yeoman compensate for any suspected thinness in other narratives on the pilgrimage. With regard to the poet's humor, however, we may say that it is never presumptuously forward. In using it Chaucer does not strike a professional pose.

The text used in the present study is that of *The Complete Works of Geoffrey Chaucer* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1933), edited by Professor F. N. Robinson. It is quoted here by permission of the publishers. For the few passages from Shakespeare I have used Professor Kittredge's edition, published by Ginn and Company in 1936. For the passages quoted (with slight modification) from Mr. F. S. Ellis's translation of the *Roman de la Rose* I am indebted to E. P. Dutton & Company for permission to use the edition published in the Temple Classics.

Three of the essays in this book have appeared before. "Troilus on Determinism" was published in *Speculum*, VI (1931), 225-243; "Chaucer and the Common People" was printed in the *Journal of English and Germanic Philology*, XXIX (1930), 376-384; and "Chaucer and Medieval Romance" was included in the *Essays in Memory of Barrett Wendell*, pp. 95-108. For permission to use this material again (in which I have made a very few unimportant changes and

omitted documentation) I am grateful to the Editors of these respective publications and to the Harvard University Press. For reading most of my manuscript and for suggesting minor alterations I am also under obligation to Professor George L. Kittredge, Sir Herbert Grierson, President William A. Neilson of Smith College, and Professor Charles J. Hill. There are other debts that should be noticed. If at times my criticism shows insight, I owe the achievement, at least in part, to Dr. Neilson, an inspiring teacher and a tolerant friend, and to Professor Kittredge, who has been a master to many of us. Old debts of the same sort, long left without acknowledgment, are those to Professor John Muirhead, Professor Milton H. Turk, and Professor Philip B. Goetz. For points in the psychological study of some of the characters I am indebted to my friends Dr. Thaddeus H. Ames and Professor William S. Taylor.

A special word of gratitude, however, should go to my companion of many years, my wife, who now repudiates the adjective "patient" but who in encouraging me to the performance of this task and in seeing it through has been "eever in oon ylike sad and kynde."

H. R. P.

Northampton, Massachusetts
January, 1939

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ON REREADING CHAUCER

Chapter I

THE IDEA OF HUMOR

IN A CLASSIC and nowadays generally unread essay, James Russell Lowell indicated an essential quality in Geoffrey Chaucer when he spoke of him as "healthy." To this he added the word ("hearty," which is undoubtedly accurate for certain of Chaucer's moods, although I am not quite so sure of its further application.) The health of the poet's spirit is pervasive in all his works, which exhibit nothing that from any point of view may be called morbid, however much they may show stretches and to modern taste or passages offensive to the excessively puritanical. No strains from the music of the Dance of Death, which pleased certain ears in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, no rarefied religiosity or unworldly melancholy mar his lines. As we cannot say of Swift or Pope or Sterne, no rancor poisons the spring of his genius; he has less acerbity than Dryden, and unlike many writers he does not pause in his verse for intervals of bad temper. His peculiar trait may perhaps be described by the allied expression "sanity." ("Whether Chaucer saw life whole, I do not know," writes Professor Kittredge. "One thing I know — he saw it steadily

(Dryden had the characteristic in mind when he referred to the poet's "good sense.") But what I am now moved to inquire is whether it might not equally well be called "good humor." (Contrasting him with Dante, whose satire

is "like a blast of the divine wrath," Lowell goes on to say that Chaucer's "is genial with the broad sunshine of humor, into which the victims walk forth with a delightful unconcern, laying aside of themselves the disguises that seem to make them uncomfortably warm, till they have made a thorough betrayal of themselves so unconsciously that we almost pity while we laugh.") All this applies well enough to writings in this vein, but what about his poetry and prose where satiric purpose seems to be mainly absent? Do we find there the light of the same healthy spirit playing upon the narrative and illuminating its significance? Or perhaps it does not busy itself with significance at all, but simply affords the pleasure that health and humor in themselves are likely to create. Is Chaucer's quality the same thing as sanity after all, in the sense that the term implies the possession of wisdom? (And is the humor) he shows anything more than the symptom of physical well-being, expressing itself through the instinct of play, (restraining him,) it may well be, (from piercing into those depths of understanding where the tragic note must be heard and high seriousness is perpetually at home?)

With some interest in such problems as these I have been reading Chaucer's works for many years, mindful of the advice of a great critic that one must live in the poet's company before one ventures to think ~~one~~ at least partly understands him. (Humor there is almost everywhere in his works, I have no doubt of that.) But when it comes to a demonstration of the point, the task is supremely difficult. Readers who perceive none here or there will always urge that it is not present, that we are reading things into lines that were meant

to be taken at their face value, and doubtless that we are moved by some dark purpose to uncover irony or mirth where none was intended. Concerning the perception of values there can never be argument. Chaucer himself must have found the reader who is lacking in humor particularly hard to manage. Insight into the matter of humor is in any case a delicate faculty, and as it varies from one individual to another so it has differed in intensity from one century to another. In the long history of the appreciation of Chaucer's poetry, as it is spread before us in Miss Spurgeon's *Five Hundred Years of Chaucer Criticism and Allusion*, one may see that understanding of this special feature has been slow in developing. "It is not . . . until well on in the nineteenth century," Miss Spurgeon observes, "not indeed until Leigh Hunt wrote on it in 1846, that Chaucer's humour seems to have met with any adequate recognition." Francis Beaumont, it is true, found the poet "the verie life it selfe of all mirth and pleasant writing," a comment I like to remember. But Samuel Johnson thought the "tale of *The Cock*" "hardly worth revival," and another eighteenth-century writer regarded it as "foolish, if not worse." They must have assumed, as Addison had written:

. Age has rusted what the Poet writ
Worn out his Language, and obscur'd his Wit
In vain he jests in his unpolish'd strain
And tries to make his Readers laugh in vain

The *Parliament of Fowls* could survive, I suppose, as a "poet's poem," so to speak; the *Troilus* and the *Knight's Tale* could stand on their feet as straight narrative. Even to-day there are readers who find the *House of Fame* dull.

Not only in critical writing but in the modernizations one can see the failure to catch the particular flavor of Chaucer's humor. I am not concerned to prove this point, but I may illustrate it by a reference to one of the best modern renderings, written by a poet with exceptional insight. Take the story of Midas in the *Wife of Bath's Tale* and in Dryden's rendering. For my purpose I shall quote only the ending, first as it is in Chaucer. The wife of Midas thus tells her secret:

"Birweye me nat, thou water, with thy soun,"
 Quod she, "to thee I telle it and namo,
 Myn housbonde hath longe asses erys two!
 Now is myn herte al hool, now is it oute
 I myghte no lenger kepe it, out of doute."

D 974-978.

And thus it is rendered by Dryden:

"To thee alone, O lake," she said, "I tell
 (And, as thy queen, command thee to conceal,
 Beneath his locks the king my husband wears
 A goodly royal pair of asses ears
 Now I have eas'd my bosom of the pain,
 Til the next longing fit return again!"

195-200

Some humor inevitably remains, of course. But the compactness within the line, the pat rhymes, the gasp of relief in the repeated "now," are all missing. Thus in the seventeenth century one had to polish the rough diamond. So Alexander Pope changed what he took from the *House of Fame* for his *Temple*. As Thomas Campbell wrote, "Much of Chaucer's fantastic matter has been judiciously omitted. . . . In Pope,

the philosophy of fame comes with much more propriety from the poet himself than from the beak of a talkative eagle." How ill we could spare the bird despite the gain in propriety! With Pope the man of great authority who comes in at the end challenges the dreamer, who concludes the poem with an aspiration

"Then teach me, Heav'n! to scorn the guilty bays,
Drive from my breast that wretched lust of praise,
Unblemish'd let me live or die unknown,
Oh, grant an honest fame, or grant me none!"

521-524

The point is open to dispute, but I am strongly of the opinion that Chaucer's poem, if it was ever completed, did not end that way.

(But the question doubtless rises as to what we mean by humor. This we must make clear if ever we are to examine instances in the poet's works and relate our observations to a consideration of his healthy spirit and good sense. (It is,) I think, based on a sense of incongruity, probably between the transitory and the permanent. This is the essence of Bergson's definition, in the clash he envisages between the mechanical or static and the changing and living. When a man stumbles he may offer a comic appearance; the humor of the episode lies in the incongruity between his normal self as a properly functioning man and the instant interruption of his procedure.) We hardly need to decide whether the man is for the moment the victim of the mechanical, or whether such incidents are the result of the play of unreasoning force, which is the evil spirit in Plato's cosmogony. One thing is certain, the effect of the incongruity can hardly be disastrous

or humor is replaced by tragic irony. Also it may be insisted that no feeling of superiority is required in the onlooker (though it may indeed be present); humor is allied to the spirit of play. Fundamentally no doubt the sense of incongruity is based on detachment—perhaps even an awareness of escape—and a sense of proportion; for by a sense of proportion we imply, I think, (some insight into the distinction between the transitory and the permanent.) By permanent, I hasten to say, we need not mean everlasting or eternal, only that which endures. And the onlooker who perceives the humor of a situation may not only be guiltless of all feeling of superiority but see in a comic episode implications that include appeals to something close to pity and terror. Remember, Onlooker, you may stumble too! —

But we need not attempt to go deeply into this problem. My purpose here is not primarily philosophical or systematic. I offer these remarks tentatively as I do the observations that follow in the succeeding chapters. We can take pleasure in noticing what seems to fall into the class of what is humorous and make many other observations as well. For my hope is really by comment and discussion to reveal more of the meaning of Chaucer than has been perceived hitherto. I have even the desire to find out something more of what the poet himself was like, and certain of the conditions that lay behind the composition of some of his works. In the process I believe there will appear now and then new evidence to support Lowell's dictum, but I am far from intending to write a discourse on the single theme of humor. Much may be turned up in any search by an indirect approach, and, in an age when readers inevitably differ on fundamentals

aesthetic as well as philosophical, impressionistic criticism is at times our only resource.

Let me not seem, however, to discount a scholarly approach to the subject. Shooting feathered arrows of thought here and there into problems undoubtedly reveals much that is missed by a judicious and logical procedure. But too much has been made of the failure of the scientific method in the field of aesthetics. Especially in the case of writers living in another age than ours, when the language was different and the whole attitude toward writing was on another basis, it is the scholar who has spent long hours training himself in a real sense for Middle English meanings, who has watched the intricacy of borrowing — to-day we might mistakenly say pilfering — by one poet from another in the process of composition, it is he who can perceive subtle implications in the use of material and who now and then must lead the way in criticism. This is not to maintain that he will always be right in his judgments, but that he has on one side at least a better chance of being right. He knows, let us say, how Deschamps used a theme in one of his works, and thus he catches overtones when he finds Chaucer putting the same ideas in a very different context. In a masterly way Professor Lowes showed the connotation of the phrases in the description of the Prioress which the English poet took from the Roman de la Rose and the poetry of Courtly Love. Let me quote from his remarks regarding her smile "simple and coy": "There, in the second line, is struck the keynote of the description. The convention didn't belong to the nun at all, as nun. To every one of Chaucer's readers its distinctly earthly rather than heavenly flavor was unmistakable."

Moreover the real student will not be misled by modern developments of the word "coy" into thinking that it suggests the affectedly demure. ✓

Such an obvious instance of the scholar's advantage is necessary to cite in view of the fact that he is often suspect the moment he steps out of his rôle as the hunter of literary sources or the cataloguer of grammatical forms. It was by Mr. Lowes's tireless pursuit of the phrase "simple and coy" in line after line of poetry that he perceived its background and its redolent association. In a fashion almost parallel Mr. Kittredge's study of the *Book of the Duchess* and its French sources enabled him to see that it is French to the fingertips and at the same time highly original. "For Chaucer uses his borrowings with the power of a master, and nowhere in the poem does his originality appear more strikingly than in the description of the Duchess Blanche, — the very place where his indebtedness is most conspicuous." Now we may recall that this description is presumably a portrait and that in this collection, mostly of borrowed lines, fourteenth-century readers could see the lady's actual features. It is an astounding fact, but one that only the scholar could have made clear. Of the poem Mr. Kittredge further remarks: "Never was there a more conventional situation — a dream, a paradise of trees and flowers and birds, a lamenting lover, an incomparable lady. We who wander through the middle ages have seen and heard it all a hundred times." Yes, we may reflect, but it took much thoughtful wandering before these observations could be made. It signifies all the more that years of such study have preceded the conclusions here and elsewhere enunciated in Mr. Kittredge's essay, as he

restores the poem to its proper place of dignity in criticism. He is able to detect the conventional by comparison with other poetry of the kind, and he can also indicate in what way "the conventions are [here] vitalized.")

One reason why Lowell's essay is to-day commonly unread is that, despite its own delightful quality of freshness, a quality it has assimilated from Chaucer, much of it has passed into common property and is no longer new. Another reason is that in certain points it seems mistaken, as when Lowell observed, ". . . for I think it a great mistake to attribute to [Chaucer] any properly dramatic power, as some have done" But certainly still another reason is that its scholarship is out of date. I am reminded of William Hazlitt's error as he writes. "One of the finest parts of Chaucer is of this mixed kind. It is the beginning of the *Flower and the Leaf*, where he describes the delight of that young beauty, shrowded in her bower, and listening, in the morning of the year, to the singing of the nightingale. . . ." But we now know that he did not write the *Flower and the Leaf*. Isaac Disraeli quotes with approval the statement that "of all poets, Chaucer seems to have been fondest of the singing of birds" But first we must know whether the lines attributed to him about birds are genuinely his. And, if so, did he coldly take them over for reasons that have little to do with their song? For they are found in almost countless passages describing nature; as a student, who has investigated medieval accounts of the seasons, laments: ". . . one cannot hope to be exhaustive when one deals with centuries of 'singing birds.' " The critic is dependent on the scholar and facts must be tested before inferences are made. Thus Disraeli writes: "It

was behind the bars of a gloomy window in the Tower . . . that Chaucer, recent from exile and sore from persecution, was reminded of a work popular in those days, and which had been composed in a dungeon, — 'The Consolations of Philosophy,' by Boethius. . . . He composed his 'Testament of Love,' substituting for the severity of an abstract being the more genial inspiration of love itself." But, again, we are now quite certain that this work was not his, and the discovery of its true authorship was made in time for Lowell to say: "We are thankful that Chaucer's shoulders are finally discharged of that weary load, 'The Testament of Love.'"

But it would be churlish not to recognize the gifts of the critic and merely to list examples of this kind. I simply want to urge that the most valid criticism of at least the older poets will come, to be sure, from one who has an insight into aesthetic values but also from one who has gone through some of the process followed by the scholar. If this provision is allowed, impressionistic criticism is still possible on its own terms. Yet it will be somewhat affected in its procedure; for it should take account not only of the impression a work of art makes on its modern readers but of that which it was intended to make on readers at any time, and here again scholarship will have something to say. Indeed the result will be similar to judicial criticism if the judgments, the prejudices, the principles of the writer, are examined with reference to what he does. While the reader may not share the philosophy of the poet, he must include it in his consideration of artistic values, or he will miss important elements in that emotional pattern which the poet has designed. If he finds

fault with the philosophy because it is shallow, he may seem to have left the realm of aesthetic criticism; but his aim quite justly may be to show its weakness in comparison with some other which would have a richer emotional and thus artistic content. For example, he may complain if a writer is so romantic as to set forth only what is remote from life and experience, since an art so little realistic is not the one to move the reader most profoundly in terms of his own experience. If the critic, following Longinus, searches for the "great thoughts" which are the mark of the sublime, he must at some time ponder over the problem of what characterizes the greatness of the thought.

But when a critic thus takes account of something other than mere texture and pigment, if he drags in philosophy and morals, he incurs the risk at once of being denounced as academic. He will probably slip at times into the use of technical expressions. He may at times be systematic and even conscientious. He can reply, of course, that in all such aberrations his purpose is no worse than to illuminate and reveal, but even then he will be regarded with distrust. The Host on the pilgrimage to Canterbury felt he must warn the Clerk:

"Youre termes, youre colours, and youre figures,
Kepe hem in stoor til so be that ye endite
Heigh style, as whan that men to kynges write."

E. 16-18.

I think there is a shot here at all fine writing. The only obvious remedy is to avoid the logic of the monograph, and to adopt a method less direct and more casual. This will be an

advantage to anyone who sets out to investigate the poet's humor; for such a task involves special difficulties of its own. In being systematic about that a scholar can be far too funny for what he is trying to do, without uncovering the full humor of the original. It is hard to prove that at least a smile is hidden where none has been seen before. It is safer to disclaim the intention of dealing with the subject at all, or at any rate to make it only a subordinate consideration.

I still admire Professor Saintsbury's comments on certain aspects of this "all-pervading" quality in Chaucer. It is one, he quickly and I think cautiously adds, "which some, even of those who enjoy it heartily and extol it generously, do not quite invariably seem to comprehend." He alludes to some readers who seem "destitute of the sense itself." This humor, he continues, "'works i' the earth so fast' that you never can tell at what moment it will find utterance. . . . It is by no means certain that in [Chaucer's] displays of learning he is not mocking or parodying others as well as relieving himself. It is by no means certain that, seriously as we know him to have been interested in astronomy, his frequent astronomical or astrological lucubrations are not partly ironical." "His good humour is even more pervading. It gives a memorable distinction of kindness between *The Wife of Bath's Prologue* and the brilliant following of it by Dunbar in *The Tua Mariit Wemen and the Wedo*, and it even separates Chaucer from such later humorists as Addison and Jane Austen, who, though never savage, can be politely cruel. Cruelty and Chaucer are absolute strangers. . . ." Well, in the sense that Addison and Jane Austen showed their finesse, I am not so sure whether Chaucer's satire was any less mordant. What

about the Pardoner and the Merchant in their own stories? But I am now chiefly interested in Mr. Saintsbury's fear that not all readers will find the quality of humor where he does, and that he must expound it for the unseeing. This I fancy is a hopeless undertaking; all that can be done is for those who agree in perceiving it here and there to rejoice together. Disquisitions must be left for more serious business.

Some years ago, when the date of the poet's birth was much discussed, passages in his works which happen to refer to his age were brought forward as evidence that when he wrote a certain poem he was so and so many years old. Thus in the *House of Fame* we read the challenge of the talkative eagle:

"Wilt thou lere of sterres aught?"

"Nay, certeynly," quod y, "ryght naught"

"And why?" "For y am now to old"

993-995

And critics who dated the poem not later than 1386, and perhaps ten years earlier, asked themselves whether the poet if born as late as 1340 or 1346 could have regarded himself as too old at forty-six (or less) to hear something about astronomy. The medieval attitude toward age was studied, and parallels adduced to prove that in those days a man was regarded as old from forty on. But perhaps this poem was written when Chaucer was much younger than that — even at the age of thirty-five, at the prime of life the poet would say and "*nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita*" others might urge. Even then there would be point; for in his reply the eagle's victim is only trying to shut off the long edifying dis-

course to which he has had to listen. And the bird shows his disappointment when he goes on:

"Elles I wolde the have told,"
 Quod he, "the sterres names, lo,
 And al the hevenes sygnes therto,
 And which they ben " "No fors," quod y.

996-999

The eagle manages to accomplish some of this all the same, and Chaucer cannot stop him entirely. The bird shows the pride in his learning that the Canon's Yeoman feels in his knowledge of alchemy, and pours it out with a similar zest. There is no reason at all to look for evidence of the poet's age here unless we choose to miss another point. But there is reason here to suspect that Chaucer saw the humor of a display of this kind, just as he did in the case of Chantecler and Pertelote. While it is difficult to prove this interpretation, it is none the less important not to miss it lest we suppose that the poet wore his own learning simply as a badge of honor.

But the skeptical may well ask why, if humor was so long in coming to its fruition, as we infer from Miss Spurgeon's survey of Chaucer criticism, there is any likelihood that it flourished or was understood in the fourteenth century. Would the poet, no matter how well endowed himself with this faculty, write in terms which his audience or readers of his own time could not possibly appreciate or grasp? Yet (there is no possible doubt that humor, irony, wit, and satire were widely understood and relished in the Middle Ages. The animal epics show it; the student songs have now one, now another of these qualities; the development of comedy

leading to the *Second Shepherds' Play* of the Towneley Cycle proves the point; wit and sometimes even humor touch the allegories of the Court of Love, as, for instance, in the Church service of the birds in Jean de Condé's *Messe des Oisiaus*. Chaucer's contemporaries, Gower and Lydgate, were not strong in this type of appeal, that is certain; but there is a touch in the *Tale of Florent* and something more in *Bycorne and Chichevache*. (Chaucer got some of his material in this vein from Deschamps.) His Envoys to Scogan and to Bukton and to Sir Philip la Vache show that there were some people to enjoy his subtlety. I think his reference to Gower in the Introduction to the *Man of Law's Tale*, when he says that he himself never wrote of Canacee (of such cursed stories he says fie!), and his allusion to moral Gower at the end of the *Troilus*, were both meant to be humorous (or something like it) for others than just himself. (He makes fun of others as he makes fun of himself, and he gives every impression that his fun was meant to be shared. How high the general average of humor was in the period he wrote, it is hardly possible to determine here. Yet, considering the elements in Chaucer's works which are generally accepted as humorous in purpose, we may say that the poet found a contemporary spirit that prompted him to the full expression of this talent, and an assurance in his world that his fullest inspiration in this sort of writing would meet a response.)

(It remains to inquire whether the highest type of appeal can ever be made in writing of this sort. Even to-day there are readers who regard humor as trivial, as if comedy must always be an interlude, and ~~much~~ a little lower than the

dignity of the angels, we have it on high authority that jesting and foolish talking are sometimes inconvenient. Chaucer can reach the heights in realism, yes, and, if he can step elegantly enough, ~~in the~~ romantic; but can the sublime be achieved through humor? To answer this question at once we have only to recall the great examples. I have said that humor implies a sense of harmless incongruity between the transitory and the permanent; and thus whatever its overtones is found in the scene of the knocking at the gate in *Macbeth*. For many this scene long had nothing better than the meaning of the irrelevant. But in a subtle way that is its very point. De Quincey taught criticism its deeper meaning, the incongruity lodged in the porter's silly speech contrasted with the knocking of a world demanding admittance to tragedy. While the episode as a whole has its own grim irony, the porter's speech is harmless enough; by its use the humor is lifted to sublimity. Or if it be maintained that by this process the humor is transmuted into something else, there is always the scene of Falstaff and Hal, where the Prince issues his challenge. The Hostess has quoted the rascal's boast that the Prince owes him a thousand pounds.

Prince Sirrah, do I owe you a thousand pound?

Falstaff A thousand pound, Hal? A million!

Thy love is worth a million, thou owest me thy love

I Henry the Fourth, III, iii, 153-157

Wit there is here in the quick turn, no doubt, and pathos as well, but they serve the dominant humor. It is to this expression of love between the two great characters that the later rebuke emotionally points back, when Hal says: "I

know thee not, old man. Fall to thy prayers." (*II Henry the Fourth*, V, v, 51.)

(In fact, I find that the sublime may be achieved in humor in various ways. In such illustrations as those just considered it is mainly in terms of human character. The same is true with *Don Quixote* perhaps; together with wit this is what we find in most satiric writing. The weaknesses or the deeps of human nature are made visible, and the operation is effected with less pain than with tragedy. The range of opportunity, all the way from grossness to the intellectual laughter of high comedy, follows the infinite variety of human nature itself. But there is another kind of sublimity in humor, which is familiar with authors who put the emphasis elsewhere) fin it in Molière, who is witty and ironic and also humorous, as in the famous scene when Monsieur Jourdain is provoked to observe that his opponent does not fence according to the rules: "... tu me pousse en tierce avant que de pousser en quarte, et tu n'as pas la patience que je pare." (*Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme*, III, iii) I find it even more where Mme. Jourdain rebukes her husband for cultivating the nobility, and he replies. "Lors que je hante la noblesse, je fais paroître mon jugement; et cela est plus beau que de hanter vostre bourgeoisie." Here, I think, we find the dramatist likes his leading character for the moment. (But the predominating interest of Molière,) I think, is less in the values of human nature which he displays than in the situations and indeed the forces that serve to expose them. This possibly is just another way of saying that (as an artist he seeks to produce) his effect chiefly in his design, he cares more about the pattern than the elements of emotion and human character that

compose it. Unlike Shakespeare, who in Falstaff shows many kinds of traits, Molière strings his characteristics on one thread the avaricious, the hypocrite, and so on. The universality implicit in this concern is a step removed from that which has to do with the general significance of human nature itself, it deals rather with elements in some kind of cosmic plan that discovers human beings to one another or to themselves.)

(There is, however, at least another kind of sublime humor, and this is more difficult to describe. It is, I believe, the particular quality of the poet whose imagination at once expresses itself symbolically, in a rich profusion of figures of speech dramatically personified or set forth in allegory because literal statement is inadequate. Its stuff, of course, is ultimately human nature and ordinary experience, but transformed into poetry by the intensity of the artist's insight into abstract meanings. (This may be found in Aristophanes, in *The Frogs* for example; it also appears in Bottom's translation in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.) It furnishes exquisite notes to *The Tempest* in the person of Caliban as well as in that of Ariel; the whole play, in fact, may be said to be on this level. I can imagine the claim made with good reason that (in humor of this type there is something mystical, occasionally its overtones are without doubt celestial.) But the mystical may also be present in that of the first and second types. (Sufficient belief in the magnificence of human nature (apart entirely from the problem of whether it is fallen from grace, which is another matter) will radiate this quality in humor of the first type In Molière's comedy the power of life to reveal implies something of almost the same illumination.)

(But perhaps I must revert to the question whether it is the humor in the instances I have cited which is in itself exalted. The argument on that score I am afraid must depend on the extent to which the reader feels its power. Arnold could not find high seriousness in Chaucer.) He has been answered with references to the *Epilogue of the Troilus*, but another critic has shrewdly pointed to part of the speech of the Wife of Bath about herself.) Let me quote it.

/ But, Lord Crist! whan that it remembreth me
 Upon my yowthe, and on my joltee, |
 It tikleth me aboute myn herte roote
 Unto this day it dooth myn herte boote
 That I have had my world as in my tyme
 But age, allas! that al wole envenyme,
 (Hath me biraft my beautee and my pith
 Lat go, farewell! the devel go therwith!
 The flour is goon, ther is namoore to telle,
 The bren, as I best kan, now moste I selle,
 But yet to be right myrie wol I fonde.
 Now wol I tellen of my fourthe housbonde)

D 469-480.

"The positive quality of such a passage as this," wrote Professor Neilson, "its vividness, its zest, its penetration to the very marrow of life, and the informing of every phrase and accent with vital energy, have much more to do with the production of a highly exalted poetic enjoyment than seriousness of treatment or theme." No, sublimity is not a matter of solemnity but rather of vitality, of life itself in its fullness and with all the disturbing implications that accompany it. Religious pictures may or may not show it in the

greatest abundance; it may appear also in Rembrandt, or, say, in the smiling cavalier of Franz Hals.)

So far in the discussion I have used the word "humor" in the modern sense without apology. But some student, who remembers the old physiology with its humors, or its temperaments based on one or another of these, and who is aware of the sense of the word in the title of certain of Jonson's plays, may reproach me with ambiguity. It is now relevant to point out how this expression, when it assumed anything like the modern meaning, had special reference to human character. One probably thinks of the old use of the term when one reads again the description of the Canterbury pilgrims, although immediately their richness of temperament, their power to escape classification in this way, will strike the analyst. (A sense of the incongruity in certain elements of human nature is, I suspect, the first and most elementary form of humor among the types that I have been discussing. The second and third types are more sophisticated, perhaps the production of a fuller insight into life, perhaps only that of a greater creative power of expression. The first, few would deny, is often found in Chaucer. Commenting on the more earthy passages in the *Canterbury Tales*, Mr. de Selincourt suggests "that if such things are comic they are only comic from a sense of incongruity, and that their whole humour depends ultimately upon that ideal which they seem to travesty or to outrage," and further "... the Wife of Bath's philosophy of life is only amusing to you in so far as you do not share it." Here the perception of the distinction between the transitory and the permanent is plain enough, and the suggestion has its value. (But I

would urge that the humor consists less in the outraged ideal than in the spectacle of human nature as we know it and in part share it. We do not feel the humor of these pilgrims in so far as they are unlike us, on the contrary we have a bond in our common weaknesses.) This is not to say, I hasten to add, that these weaknesses, though they make the whole world kin, must in every way or at all times possess us. But I think we enter most fully into the play when we know them from experience, and when we feel perhaps a kind of personal release we have longed for in the blunder or exposure or slip of someone besides ourselves. (Does not Freud suggest something of the sort in his explanation of laughter? There can be no doubt that what Chaucer represents is an assortment of traits characteristic of mankind at large.)

But does he show any other sort of humor? As the question is put I find the shadow of academic halls upon me, and I confess it irks me and hampers speech. I cannot list the types of humor again and catalogue instances. Some day when the technique of science has revealed all the truth available in literature, this will be done. All possible types of humor will be set down and the examples subjoined in proper and graded order, and one can then turn to the special case one desires or see in the graphical outline appended the general trend of development. We shall be able to prove perhaps that when Chaucer left the Custom House his humor increased for a season, or again that the daily pitcher of wine awarded to him served more to sadden than to cheer. On the other hand, it may be evident that when his verse was at its merriest he was most bored with life. But I cannot offer a contribution to such a study except by the attempt to make

his meaning clearer or to suggest certain qualities in his nature or to say what I suppose to be his intention here and there. If these remarks are modified by readers who come closer to that great and pleasant genius, I can only be the happier. For, as everyone will agree, it is more important to know what Chaucer meant than it is to enjoy what the critic says.

Chapter II

THE COURT OF LOVE

JOHN OF GAUNT, Duke of Lancaster, was a great knight. In his campaigns in France and Spain he showed himself a most valiant warrior, apparently he liked a good fight if the end were crowned with glory. Counselor to young Richard and dignified with certain royal claims of his own, he was fitted by temperament to succeed to the English throne, although Fate and his own right arm gave him only the picturesque eminence of being King of Castile through marriage. The startling contrasts of his life, his defense of Wycliffe when the great Lollard was hounded by enemies and his repudiation of the man when the heretical nature of Lollardry was made clear, his constant sympathy with the poor and the response of hatred from the great throng of rebels who burned the Savoy, his ambition not without its touch of swashbuckling and his humble obedience to the Church, all commend themselves to the modern biographer with a taste for ironies. At one period married to the saintly Constance and beginning every day with Mass, the Duke nevertheless managed an amour with his children's governess, Katharine Swynford, and kept his faith in his own fashion, as we can see when two years after the death of Constance he married his mistress and legitimized their children. "Sage et imaginatif" is the way Froissart described him. We can put it in a medieval manner by saying that like

Roland he was "proz" and like Oliver "sages," with the energy of Godfrey de Bouillon and the power of Charlemagne.

But if there are inconsistencies in his life they suit the pageantry of fourteenth-century England, which men called "merry" despite the Black Death and the sufferings and revolt of the peasants, when treatises on Vice and Virtue and social documents like *Piers Plowman* were read, and yet the elegances of French manners and French poetry on themes of the Court of Love were familiar. The life of the time affords God's plenty, the corrupt as well as the pious walk together on the road to Canterbury for reasons all their own. If the earthly pilgrimage arrives at holiness, there is much to be said along the way. Nationalism, individualism of all kinds, are in the air, and there is gusto in everybody when new things are afoot, especially when the ideas thus embodied spell risk. But the literature of the period is in the main simple and even conventional, the expression even of passion still follows old patterns. The sentiment and realism of Courtly Love dominated the vogue, borrowing force from Ovid and from the *Roman de la Rose*, which, though a century old, continued to fascinate readers, while its pretty design was often imitated.]

Of all the chapters of John of Gaunt's history which one would like to know fully, the most appealing perhaps is the story of his love affair with his first wife, Blanche. Here was true romance. It lasted only ten years; but from the time when the Duke made arrangements for the Masses for her soul (the entries are found all through his Register) until the day his will directed that his body should lie in St Paul's

close to his lady's remains ("juxte ma treschere jady's compaigne Blanch"), the evidence of his undying devotion — despite other attachments — is ample enough. In his youth no doubt he had been a "great lover and a lusty bachelor"; here was the object of his first adoration. When Queen Philippa and the Duchess Blanche were fatally stricken, the Duke was abroad, and the bitter news greeted him on his return from Picardy. All glad thoughts were henceforth turned to sadness. Which of the trite phrases of the Court of Love could express this reality? The perfect romance of their lives together would have no further lines. *perfunctory*

But while the priests chanted requiems and incense rose to God, would it not be possible to make one last tribute to his lady? What about the poets who were always turning out lyrics to celebrate the charms of this or that fair creature? What of Geoffrey Chaucer, whom the Duke had noticed at Hatfield a dozen years before and had seen off and on ever since, a fellow who could turn a ribald jest, who had shrewd comments to make at the expense of many a fool, who could write extraordinary verse and yet could be trusted to be sensible? He was now Esquire of the King's household, and well respected as such; in the present year he had fought in France. Moreover he was doing a translation of the *Roman de la Rose*, and had read some of it aloud. He could be relied on to know tact and to command his speech. Let him be the means of expressing our grief. A marginal note in a manuscript tells that Chaucer was commissioned in some such way as this.

/ But marginal notes cannot always be trusted. Perhaps / there was a different scene. In such a loss, with the tragedy of the Plague all round us, and the loveliness of the Duchess

in everyone's mind, no songs may be sung. It is a time for cursing the ruler of the universe, who permits these outrages to nature and to art. Or since bluster will not help, we may sit in despair, while black garments keep the crowd away. And yet, one man may approach. He is a good fellow, who has amused us in better times with good humor and racy anecdote, with a tact that never breaks the line between commoner and royalty, with soldier's manliness and poet's delicacy. His is a pious and sweet soul. He now has nothing to say, but he falls on his knee and offers a manuscript which contains a poem. In the verses written here there is nothing mawkish, and so its sympathy can gain entrance and loose the bonds of despair.

But what about Chaucer's difficulty in this task? Either way there could be no false step, whether written by command or as a free offering of devotion, the poem had to be at once intimate and humbly detached. A mere retainer could not address the great Duke otherwise. Affection there might be, implicit in the lines, but never too openly expressed. Affection even for the Duchess herself might be conveyed, but the poet could not freely come out with it. How could any dreamer, according to the conventions of the Court of Love, dare to lift his eyes to Blanche, especially at such a time? Chaucer set to work not without a consideration of precedent. There were no elegies he would care to copy. I do not know whether he saw the *Regret de Guillaume*, written as a lament for the death of the Duke's grandfather. But in any case it was natural to turn to the literature of the Court of Love, wherein poets had sung the praises of this lady and that. The abler poets in France were still using the form,

and the convention had its freshness. To express grief in this way would give every line a special meaning, just slightly and not unbecomingly satirical or sophisticated, in a way appropriate for the court and yet not cynical. The poem must keep every known feature of the literature of that type and must echo as many examples of it as possible. There would be the dream of the realm of love, or something of the sort. Let the dreamer be an onlooker, a poor dolt who could never quite understand what was taking place but whose questions would reveal everything. Then the scene could form itself after the pattern of Machaut's *Jugement dou Roy de Behaingne*, where the knight debates whether it is better to lose one's love by infidelity or by death. The dreamer could elicit from the knight a full account of his great loss. And no one could say whether the dreamer was the poet, or whether the knight was precisely John of Gaunt.

So Chaucer may have approached the problem of composition, and proceeded to surround himself with works that he could use or imitate. It is not the way writers do to-day. But we know how Coleridge borrowed in a supremely imaginative poem. With reference to his own stories Robert Louis Stevenson confessed, "As if I had not borrowed the ideas of half my own! As if any one who had written a story ill had a right to complain of any other who should have written it better!" Deschamps invited Chaucer to cull some of the flowers in his literary garden, and the English poet wasted no time but went ahead and did so. I wish I knew how many of these passages he carried in his head, and how many he took from the book as it lay on his table. No ordinary copybook could hold all the lines he took from other

writers and put to good use. A retentive memory he had no doubt; but I wonder whether that contained all the phrases from the *Roman de la Rose*, Boethius, Froissart, Machaut, Deschamps, and others, that he introduced by the way in his poetizing, together with the plots or schemes he imitated. Before books were printed, the epic memory held sway and did great service, and yet the precision of Chaucer's quotation makes me suspect that he also consulted the text.

In the *Book of the Duchess*, if he began with Machaut's poem, he seems to have been reminded at once of another by the same author, the *Dit de la Fonteinne Amoureuse*. Here the narrator has intimate converse with a prince, the dream motif is used, and the story of Ceyx and Alcyone is told furnishing the perfect counterpart for Chaucer's plot. An artless dreamer appears in Froissart's *Paradys d'Amour*; and Chaucer would be reminded of that because Froissart had used Machaut's poem. Thus the framework of the story became clearer, and ornamentation was added from the *Roman de la Rose*, details for the account of Fortune came from the *Remede de Fortune*, and, as we often hear, nearly every point in the description of the Duchess was taken from one or another French poem. With such evidence as this it is hard to imagine that any really literate person of the English court could miss the frequent verbal echoes of which the poem is composed. Anyone in the Duke's household who knew even a little foreign verse would, I believe, get the impression that here was a compost rich with plums from abroad, like the many poems which told of dream and dreamer, garden and lover, in the fair fields across the channel.

(But the presiding deity here is Fortune rather than Venus. It is a striking fact. The fickle goddess, it is true, is known in other poems of the Court of Love and sometimes she is dominant, but here she alone rules. The meaning can only be that the deity who controls a world where things like Blanche's death can happen must indeed be capricious, ruthless, guided by no rational plan. Moreover there is another difference in this extraordinary elegy, from the ordinary run of Courtly Love poems, and that is something that also serves decidedly to mark it off from elegies in general. I refer to the element of humor. In the personifications, the apt speeches, the turns of plot, of the allegories of love, there is often wit but there is also humor. Perhaps it is intrinsic in the very nature of these poems, in the style of approach thus afforded to the lady, and in the mannerisms and gestures which it is the habit of this kind of verse to adopt. This is not strange. A dancing master always takes due precaution to teach his pupils to smile as they dance. The quality, something just a little more than a pleasant awareness of well being, is part of the grace of this type of expression. This, in any case, Chaucer slightly transforms and intensifies, perhaps because in the first instance he found it in his sources.

One may take almost any example. The *Roman de la Rose*, pattern for so many others, shows humor in its adventure of love, in terms of the garden and the rose. The same element appears in its pictures of Hatred, Felony, Villainy, Covetousness, and the rest, which Sir Mirth caused to be depicted on the garden wall, and again in the very conception of the porter Idleness and that of Love accompanied by "Douz Regarz," who has the two boys — one beautiful and comely,

one ugly and gnarled, symbolizing a paradox that Chaucer remembered in his two inscriptions on the gate in the *Parliament of Fowls*. The ingenuity of the plot itself shows the same spirit. For comparison one may turn to scenes in Spenser's poetry, where the beauty is richer and the humor attenuated. In the *Jugement dou Roy de Behaingne* of Guillaume de Machaut one finds it in the idea of the argument between the lady and the knight. One may indeed insist that this quality is what rescues the poetry of Courtly Love from insipidity. Chaucer was not likely to miss this aspect of its verse, and he had to retain it, not only to avoid monotony, but to remain loyal to the conventions of this *genre*. Yet he ran the risk of seeming flippant in an elegy; a literary conceit is more audacious than an ordinary metaphor and must wear its own excuse as obviously as one wears a chip on the shoulder.

But the fact is that the *Book of the Duchess* is all the more poignant because its pathos is not unrelieved. The idea of the bribe of the feather-bed for the God of Sleep, that too of the Cave of Sleep where the throng competes in sleeping, that of the puppy that guides the dreamer, many other details until the punning allusion to the Duke and Duchess at the end, show something very like levity or even the comic spirit. Against it there is, of course, the pathetic story of Ceyx and Alcyone, and in the second part the note of sadness, beginning with the loveliness of the May morning, the hunting of the deer that may not be captured, and the discovery of the knight singing his lay, is sustained. But the inconsequential development of the plot, noted by critics as essential to the dreamlike atmosphere, intensifying that idea

as taken from other poems of the type, serves here an added purpose. It gives an air of irresponsible charm, and is no less than quietly amusing. In harmony with this appears the assumed stupidity of the dreamer, his unwillingness to understand what is going on, and, in the downpour of sorrow, his obstinate inability to come in when it rains. I emphasize the feature because it seems to be appreciated less than the same element in the *House of Fame* and the *Parliament*.

The young poet then showed special skill in avoiding the tedium which this style of poetry threatened to impose on his verse. Moreover he was enabled, by the dreamer's stupid questions, to insert a portrait of the Duchess and a complimentary description of her character. And there is an alchemy (that anticipates later transmutations of the kind in his verse) in his treatment of the emotional nature of his material so that grief is expressed but carries no burden with it. An elegy may cloy as much as too many flowers. But here Chaucer gently shakes his friend to bring him back to a sense of proportion. He acknowledges the full gravity of the loss, but he reminds us of the fundamental equilibrium in nature. The more inarticulate this dreamer becomes, the more the poem speaks. By his brief questions much is revealed, his fine understanding is shown by his dullness. His words at the last are packed:

"Is that youre los? Be God, hyt ys routhe!"

1310.

With this exclamation comes the whole release. the huntsmen depart, the king goes home, we have Ceyx and Alcyone once more before us with the moral that it is vain to mourn.

"Now," says the poet, "I'll try to make a poem out of this dream." And the literal-minded will protest, "But he has!"

How did John of Gaunt feel as he read these lines for the first time? They are methodically narrative and yet somehow lyrical, dull with grief and yet happy. He must have had the excitement of discovering that the genius of the poet was here declared, and it is declared without pretentiousness, without fanfare or shaking of poetic locks. The essential rightness of the poet is visible in the whole plan of the poem. It implies, moreover, in the intricacy of its merits, that its reader would appreciate its values. Here was the bittersweet that might be missed by any but one perhaps who believed in the immortality of the soul, and that only a healthy genius could have conceived. No argument for immortality appears in the poem, it is true — not even in the story of Alcyone and her loss. On such a point, however, there is no reason to believe that the Duke, any more than the poet, had doubts. It is on the whole a matter of taste that Chaucer does not mention the doctrine, or essay at this time to talk religion with the bereaved John of Gaunt. But he does remind him of important things by the temper of his poem. Thus may the eminently sane speak in sorrow. The lugubrious tale of the knight in black and his lament — only a story so utterly trivial — could convey the full depth of the poet's comprehension. Might one take liberties with a duke in the fourteenth century when the sky was overcast and all England was in mourning? Only in terms of genuine affection, and that is what humor in this elegy means. The poet had been reading of queens' lives and of kings' and "many other little things," and then he

dreamed of a knight who had lost his lady. "This was my dream. Now it is done "

That is not the tone of *Lycidas*, *Adonais*, or *Thyrsis*, where we are invited merely to weep or at least to recollect our emotion in tranquillity. One reason for the difference is that Chaucer's poem is touched with the high frivolity of Courtly Love, another is that obviously the writer's intention was to afford comfort to John of Gaunt. How far the poet was really intimate with the Duke has been a matter for much debate. From the theory that the relationship amounted to practically nothing at all, opinion has fluctuated to the suggestion that the Duke was a lover of Philippa and that Thomas Chaucer was his natural son. What is set down as scholarship must at times sound like gossip. All we know is that Chaucer wrote at least the *Book of the Duchess* in his behalf, and in 1374 got an annuity of ten pounds perhaps as belated thanks. The annuity seems too substantial and too much belated, however, for recognition of that kind. Chaucer's sister-in-law, Katharine Swynford, was John of Gaunt's household governess and mistress and eventually his third wife. The poet wrote (in what became the *Monk's Tale*) about Pedro of Castile, father of that Constance who was the Duke's second wife, and who, I think, receives a kind of indirect complimentary allusion in the saintly heroine of the *Man of Law's Tale*. Whether Lancaster had a taste for literature it is hard to discover, I suppose; but I sometimes wonder whether the knowledge in Spain of Gower's *Confessio Amantis* (dedicated to the Earl of Derby) did not follow Katharine's marriage to Enrique of Castile. In any case all the evidence of the *Book of the Duchess* points

to the idea that the poet counted on a sensitive understanding in his reader, and on a friendliness that reached across barriers.

2

The result of a poetic success, like that of scandal, is that it must go on. The poet must write again and again and for every occasion that gives him warrant. In the achievement represented by the elegy there is full promise, I think, that he will be asked to write other occasional poems, and what is more, that the Lancaster family would be the most likely, among the first perhaps, to request performances of this kind. The family was, as people say, "literary" we can tell that from the Earl of Derby's negotiations with Gower, and his subsequent patronage, as Henry the Fourth, of Gower and Hoccleve; it is suggested in Deschamps's complimentary poem to Philippa of Lancaster, and in Hoccleve's similar tribute to Joan Beaufort. I can work out a very neat interpretation of the *House of Fame* and the *Parliament of Fowls* with reference to the family, and indeed someone else has done as much for the second of these poems. We may observe that the eagle was used as a symbol by John of Gaunt, Gower makes reference to it, and his French *Balades*, which seem to echo the *House of Fame*, the *Parliament*, and even the *Book of the Duchess*, were dedicated to Henry the Fourth. Perhaps the ruby in the ring (or that in the brooch) of Chaucer's *Troilus* is the same as that referred to in John of Gaunt's will, as "mon meillour cerf ov le bonne rubie," which he left to Katharine Swynford. (The word "cerf" may mean *jewel*.) To expound such theses, however, I am hesitant until Professor Manly discovers something in some letter, perhaps, to

demonstrate the meaning of the allusions so that we may shake Chaucer's eagles by the bills, as the poet expresses it, so palpable will they be. Yet that the *House of Fame* and the *Parliament* contain personal references I feel certain, and whatever they conveyed to whoever properly understood them, the message was not stern.

They also show in part what the poet was doing with his time. After the business of the day was over he got off by himself and covered what most men would have thought was a vast amount of reading. He kept up with the literary vogue, the literature of Courtly Love. He picked up his Ovid from time to time, his copy of the *Metamorphoses* was well thumbed. Virgil he knew and respected. In both cases, however, he found it convenient to have a French rendering near by, the *Ovide Moralisé* and the *Roman d'Enéas*, which were classical with a difference. When he wanted to consult a Latin document, it appears, he got some help from a French or — in the case of the *Heroides* — even an Italian version. Thus he satisfied his scholar's zeal for information and kept the amateur's freedom from pedantry, he also missed something of the classical spirit. He read a great amount of allegory, and at first, I think, his favorite reading apart from Ovid was the *Roman de la Rose*. It is possible and even likely that in the same period he became acquainted with those romances he made fun of in later life, *Horn Child*, *Bevis of Hampton*, *Guy of Warwick*, *Libeaus Desconnus*, and the like. Possibly we should add stories of Isolde, Lancelot, Guinevere. But at its best this romantic literature did not stamp its character upon his early writing, which is marked rather with the elegant patterns of the love-vision.

Imagine then what it was like for Geoffrey Chaucer to go to Italy! English culture, despite the shocking contrasts of the Middle Ages, has always been a little like its scenery. It is never less than discreet, and the virtue of the Englishman is a matter of never forgetting how a gentleman may act. Puritanism — and by the word I do not refer simply to morality — is really of British stock, the spinster sister of the English squire. Continental puritans are isolated like Calvin, or as with St Augustine the tendency is acquired. When a young Englishman of the fourteenth century, sensitive to color and alive to emotion, went to Italy and saw for the first time the paintings, the architecture, and the general pre-occupations of a land warm with beauty, he must have been struck with amazement. Did Chaucer witness the gorgeousness of the wedding of Lionel Duke of Clarence and Violante in 1368 in Milan? If it took him but thirty days to come home again and use the passport prepared for him for another journey, perhaps he did. At any rate he got to Italy by 1372. There Barnabò of Visconti was in good form. I do not know how early the poet came in contact with that lurid figure with his background of sumptuous banquet, drunken brawl, lechery and murder, but he had dealings with the man in 1378. Great Barnabò of Visconti, god of delight and scourge of Lombardy, "Why sholde I nat thyn infortune acounte?" And so later he did write of him along with other notables, Hercules, the King of Spain, Nebuchadnezzar, and the rest. But such a person must have made characters in the *Roman de la Rose* look like stained glass.

Petrarch, the laureate poet, and Boccaccio too were there, and one could even get their manuscripts. I wish I knew how

much they cost, but I feel sure that for Chaucer they were extremely expensive and at the same time priceless. Here was prime entertainment. But what did it mean for him to read Dante's *Divine Comedy*? Nothing in French allegory, or the verse of Guillaume de Guileville, or in moral treatises, or in the *Vision of Piers Plowman*, showed such depths. Here was an intelligence that Chaucer could understand, but one that surpassed his own. Jean de Meun was trivial beside such a writer, Ovid superficial, St Bernard narrow. Going through the folios of the *Commedia* must have been an artistic experience exciting beyond all others for the poet, but one, I suspect, of which the Englishman in him was fearful. Yet Chaucer could not resist the poem. He translated the story of Ugolino, one of the most horrible passages in the *Inferno*; he learned by heart and used the prayer to the Virgin in the ecstatic language of St Bernard in the *Paradiso*. This suggests the range of his response. I wish I could see him as he turned over these leaves in his room in England, and followed Dante's lead as Dante followed Virgil, down into Hell and up the mountain of Purgatory and then, with Beatrice as guide, took his flight through the spheres to the beatific vision. A literary excursion like this Chaucer could never talk about to others, but the impression was upon him.

Yet he was a busy man, and the Custom House, one may suppose, left him little time for contemplation. He was temperamentally a spectator of the social life of his day. There is abundant evidence that he was a good mixer and liked people. Gossip in high places informed him of an important betrothal, among friends really, and at his very doors — which may mean near Aldgate or simply in London. He

had to send his own expression of pleasure in these tidings, but not too freely. Who is he after all to give poetic sanction to an affair concerning royalty? Rumor had given him the information, let Rumor reveal it. And this deity in Virgil is called Fama. But she was not so familiar a deity as certain others in allegory, and so the poet found out what he could about her where he could. Perhaps he consulted the learned and important manual *De Genealogia Deorum*, written by Boccaccio, and available in its first form by 1378. If he heard of it in Italy, I feel confident that Geoffrey Chaucer would have tried to find a copy. It seems likely that Gower knew and used it. If Chaucer actually had access to this book, he would have read here a description of Fama as a lady of varying stature, very like an eagle with feathers furnished with eyes, who dwelt in the middle region between earth and heaven. In other words here he would have been directed by specific quotation to the passages in Virgil and Ovid which he utilized.

But the journey to her abode, how should it be taken? It might well be a long, instructive tour. Unconsciously perhaps his imagination still held certain impressions he had gained from Dante; if so they were supplemented by thoughts of the travels that one often finds in medieval romance and allegory. Alexander traveled by air, according to the romances, and Ovid told of the flight of Icarus. But since Fame's abode according to Ovid was on a mountain Chaucer would be reminded of the strange journey to Fortune's house on a rocky height in the *Anticlaudianus* of Alain de L'Isle, and that in turn would recall the flight with birds to Fortune's house on the rock of ice in the *Panthère d'Amours* of Nicole de

Margival With what bird should Chaucer travel, what better than the eagle whose symbolism was borrowed for Fame? At one time Dante dreamed, he said, that the bird of Jove carried him to the skies in that way. So the elements for the poem are gathered, and the customary vision of Courtly Love is suggested again, but again much modified. In general following the *Panthère*, with a slight change in the sequence of episodes, Chaucer planned first the visit to the temple of Love, where he could present the story of Aeneas, to whom many a royal line was traced in medieval narrative, and where he could set forth the warning against faithlessness in love, apparently essential to his purpose. The dreamer in Nicole de Margival's poem visited Venus and then found himself in a desolate region, from which the story leads on to the scene of Fortune's lofty abode. So Chaucer, who knew the motif of the desert of love in the poetry of Courtly Love, and who always represents himself as unsuccessful in affairs of the heart, could show himself lost in such an arid waste. The desert in the *Panthère* recalled perhaps the parched region in the *Inferno*, where flakes of fire tormented the sufferers, and where Dante shortly takes off on the back of the monster Geryon to fly to still lower depths of horror. Thus Chaucer, moving about where no love is, could be rescued by the eagle and borne aloft on a personally conducted tour to realms above, with a lecture on the way to explain the mechanism of the House of Fame and the rumor factory. We need not deal with sources further.

The point is simply that the best science of the day could be drawn upon to explain how gossip reaches Fame and is again dispersed. Thus realism can again supplement ro-

mance, the flight with the eagle would not be so delightful if the artificial manner of most allegories had been here retained. The realism of the rumor factory — when the poet enters the turning walls, they seem to stop, as they naturally would seem to in actual experience — is masterly despite the extravagant and even fantastic details.

In some such way as this the *House of Fame* came into being. Its purpose, I think, is obviously to deal with some of the fruits of gossip and its theme is love. Tidings of love which the poet received were what he was about to disseminate when he composed this intricate narrative. A faithful realist might protest nowadays that we need nothing so complicated to set forth Chaucer's interest and delight in the gossip, whatever it was. True enough, and so the cloudy towers of Fame's palace and the turning factory of rumors have the quality of humor. But again it is a tactful humor. These images are at once wholly confined to the imagination and yet entirely real. Apparently there is nothing personal in the satire, and at times the poet seems to be in earnest about his subject matter. Just when the man of great authority comes on the scene and the crowd scrambles up to hear him, we are ready for something true in the way of news, but — the manuscript breaks off. Was the completed poem left in the heritage of the family of John of Gaunt or the royal household? Shall we ever know? But here is humor combined with fancy in a delicate pattern of adventure, and dedicated, I believe, to the celebration of a distinguished betrothal, one perhaps on everyone's lips but not quite sealed in actuality.

Moderns sometimes do not care for the poem. After the

sixteenth-century voyages to the new world, and the later excursions in the telescope and even with the balloon up to the heavens, the old journeys to mythic realms ceased to fascinate. As for the humor, we are told that what we have here is chiefly humor of situation. Certainly that is revealed in the poet's helplessness in the desert of love, and even in Geoffrey's discomfort in his flight with the eagle. In metrical form, in tone, in procedure, the poem is written in great good spirits. Mistaken as the judgment was which found in it a parody of the *Divine Comedy*, one can see in this idea a happy fallacy as far as the indication of mood is concerned. What medieval journey to romantic or symbolic realms was ever touched with fun in this way? We can tell from the spirit of the author that the tidings, whatever they are, will be good. Yet the poem offers humor of character too, as readers have a few times observed with regard to the eagle, and as they might have added with reference to the types demanding fame. Fame herself is living. It is, of course, a part of her business to be arbitrary, and so almost automatically she has that paradoxical element which gives a third dimension even to symbolic figures. But in her emotion, as in her rage at the seventh company, who want an undeserved reputation, there is the breath of life. All through the scene there is the humor of at least traits of character. As for the eagle, here the poet anticipates his best, in the bird's pride of learning (he can lecture "lewedly to a lewed man"), in his academic jokes uttered with the right academic manner, and in his solicitude for his pupil. The poet has sacrificed his own gravity to the picture; he has let himself be carried away by the idea. Most significantly of all, he obviously likes the eagle.

Humor is of the very stuff of the poem. It is found in its conception, in the dignified sources chosen for the long disquisition, even in the details of the symbolism. The lapidaries, Boethius, the *Somnium Scipionis*, and many another solemn authority, have been called upon to give substance to this rich adventure. From Dante come lines in the Proem to the Second Book and in the Invocation at the beginning of the Third that show forth qucerly in their new context, as embodying almost a mock solemnity. One can feel the poet's own relish in the adaptation, as if we were to observe something of Chaucer's mood while he worked. He read Dante's lofty appeal to the Muses to assist him in describing the appalling journey through Hell — one of the most deeply affecting experiences in the whole realm of literature.

O mente, che scrvesti ciò ch'io vidi

Qui si parrà la tua nobilitate

Inf 11, 8-9

Then, with reference to his blithe excursion to the windy halls of Fame, Chaucer almost flippantly says:

O Thought, that wrot al that I mette,

And in the tresorye hyt shette

Of my brayn, now shal men se

Yf any vertu in the be,

To tellen al my drem aryght

523-527

We need not suppose that here he was smiling inwardly at Dante, or anything of the sort. But he must have felt pleasure in the incongruity of their setting when he took over these great lines. It is, in a way, the counterpart of what he did

when he borrowed the apparatus of the Court of Love for his elegy. It is also what many poets of Courtly Love did when they transferred the apparatus of the Church to their very secular poems. In that case, however, the humor was meant to be shared by the reader, here I wonder whether any Englishmen knew Dante well enough to identify a passage like this. Rather I think we here see something of Chaucer's enjoyment which he kept to himself. He did not mark this indebtedness.

3

The same humor appears again in the composition of the *Parliament of Fowls*. The first line shows it, where the general aphorism of Hippocrates (taken from whatever intermedialities) "ars longa, vita brevis" is applied strictly to the art of love as if that had always been its meaning. Then the detailed paraphrase of the *Somnium Scipionis*, a treatise with solemn intent if ever there was one, as an introduction to the dream of a bird parliament on St Valentine's Day, strikes us with wonder. The poet found a reference to it at the beginning of the *Roman de la Rose* as an example of the importance of dreams, and so he was prompted to use it. But why did he have to follow Africanus in his exploration of the spheres and his glance at this little earth and his moral regarding the danger of vice and the need of attention to the "common profit," if all he intended to do was to put into allegory something about the negotiations for some gentle lady's hand?

And he seyde, "Know thyself first in mortal,
And loke ay besyly thow werche and wysse

To commune profit, and thow shalt not mysse
 To comen swiftly to that place deere
 That ful of blysse is and of soules cleere

"But brekers of the lawe, soth to seyne,
 And likerous folk, after that they ben dede,
 Shul whirle aboute th'erthe alwey in peyne,
 Tyl many a world be passed . . ."

Parliament, 73-81.

"Know thyself first immortal!" Thus speaks Africanus in ringing words. I cannot help suspecting a message here, underneath the rose of the symbolism, and possibly that of the Lancasters, of serious import half flippantly put for someone whose dignity can only be touched in this way. In the lofty view of life presented in this extensive paraphrase, Chaucer flew higher than ever he did in the *House of Fame*.

Thanne tolde he hym, in certeyn yeres space
 That every sterre shulde come into his place
 Ther it was first, and al shulde out of mynde
 That in this world is don of al mankynde

67-70

A curious way to start, but not so strange if his point is briefly to admonish the young earl or prince for whom the poem is a compliment.

But far more amazing than all this is Chaucer's borrowing of lines from Dante's description of the gate of Hell to fit them, with all their horror still upon them, and expand them for the gate of the Garden of Love. How many of his readers in his own day could he expect to recognize what he had done? This transfer is more easily to be discovered than that

already noted in the beginning of the Second Book of the *House of Fame*. But I doubt whether there were many besides possibly John Gower who could be counted on to see what had happened. In the case of the *Somnium Scipionis* he named his source and obviously expected his readers to know what was going on, but not so here. Once, presumably, he had himself been stirred by those sinister words which crowned the entrance to the dark and hopeless abyss in which all men of the fourteenth century still believed:

"Per me si va nella città dolente,
Per me si va nell' eterno dolore,
Per me si va tra la perduta gente"
Inf III, 1-3

Then for the purposes of his allegory he wrote:

"Thorgh me men gon into that blysfyl place
Of hertes hele and dedly woundes cure"

and so on (*Parl.* 127 ff). As Virgil took Dante's hand and led him into the dark plain, so Chaucer tells us that while he stood in doubt Africanus seized him and pushed him into the Garden of Love. What things happened in those gardens, and what associations they had! We remember the scene where Pandarus is leading Troilus to the room where Criseyde sleeps. "Artow agast so that she wol the bite?" he asks the timid youth.

What does it mean? Are we to suspect that fundamentally Chaucer had been unmoved by the lines in the *Inferno*? On artistic grounds alone the chance of such a lack of response is unlikely. He shows again and again that he has been deeply moved by Dante. As some scholars think, the lovely bit in

the present poem about the softness of the wind is a detached echo of something in the *Purgatorio*:

Therwith a wynd, unnethe it myghte be lesse,
Made in the leves grene a noyse softe
Acordaunt to the foules song alofte.

201-203.

The passage seems closely related to the following:

Un' aura dolce, senza mutamento
Avere in sè, mi feria per la fronte
Non di più colpo, che soave vento
Per cui le fronde, tremolando pronte,
Tutte quante piegavano a la parte
U' la prim' ombra gitta il santo monte —
Non però dal lor esser dritto sparte
Tanto che li augelletti per le cime
Lasciasser d'operare ogni lor arte. .

Purg xxviii, 7-15

Here the English poet seems to have remembered the description because it is so sensitively close to nature. He has not gone back to the original to force a verbal approximation; he has simply remembered it and reproduced it with a difference in itself felicitous. The borrowing reveals the poet's taste. But we can hardly pause here for a list of the numerous passages where the flotsam and jetsam of his imagination carried a favorite phrase or two from the *Divine Comedy*. Was the subject-matter of the account of the gate of Hell such as to leave him unstirred? Was he, in other words, fundamentally cynical? His religious preoccupations, of which I shall say more later, are enough to make that impossible. The idea of Hell as a single item of doctrine was

not one to worry men much in the fourteenth century. They were bound to accept it like any other.

In any case Chaucer seems to show a similar spirit with material from another and ultimately more sacred source. This is when he adapts lines from the *Roman de la Rose* which plainly echo the *Apocalypse*. He is telling of his Earthly Paradise of love:

No man may there waxe sek ne old,
Yit was there joye more a thousandfold
Than man can telle, ne nevere wolde it nyghte,
But ay cler day to any manes syghte

Parl 207-210

Jean de Meun had written as follows:

Jamais seif avoir ne pourront,
E vivront tant come eus vourront
Senz estre malades ne mortes

Roman de la Rose, 20395-20397

Cist la nuit en esil enveie,
Cist fait le jour que dit avae,
Qui dure pardurablement,
Senz fin e senz comencement . . .

Ibid, 20559-20562.

Chaucer could hardly forget "And there shall be no more death, neither sorrow nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain . . ." "... For there shall be no night there." "And there shall be no night there; and they need no candle, neither light of the sun, for the Lord God giveth them light; and they shall reign for ever and ever." (*Rev.* xxi, 4 and 25; xxi, 5.) I cannot present here a close analysis of his indebtedness in the details of this remarkable garden, but I am in-

clined to think he went back to the *Apocalypse* at least for the accent of his lines.

Chaucer's procedure here is like what he did in the *Merchant's Tale* in his use of material from the *Song of Songs*. Here the Merchant greets his young wife in the morning with lines that in substance for Christians had long meant the call of Christ to His bride the Church:

"Rys up, my wyf, my love, my lady free!
The turtles voys is herd, my dowve sweete,
The wynter is goon with alle his reynes weete."

E 2138-2140

The explanation in all these cases, I believe, is the same. The attitude of the Middle Ages to things sacred is marked with a familiarity that seems strange to the modern, at least to the modern who can discern what is sacred or remembers reverence. For the Middle Ages, passages in literature or Scripture have one meaning in their context and possibly another as part of a general literary heritage, from which any writer of the time could take what he liked and use it. Chaucer showed no lack of understanding, no covert cynicism, when he borrowed from Holy Writ or from Dante and put his gains to another use. But he does show another side of his character in these adaptations. He must have been less than human, when he took over Dante's account of the gate of Hell and transferred it to Love, if he missed the comic element in the metamorphosis.

There is nothing original in noticing that he often took passages from serious works to get a humorous effect. But my present point is that in the *Parliament of Fowls* and else-

where we sometimes find that apparently Chaucer meant the joke for himself alone. We seem indeed to have the privilege of catching the poet's smile when he is unaware that we are looking. We have a sense of the joy and also the fun he had in his writing. We know more surely what he himself was like. It is, I grant, a fine point, this special matter of the humor of sources, and I do not want to press it too far. But giving us a glimpse as it does of the personal features of Chaucer himself, I cannot let it be misunderstood or relinquished. He had fun in composing the *House of Fame* and the *Parliament of Fowls*, and even in the *Book of the Duchess* his spirit was warm with the kindliness of humor. One is attracted by that kind of man. One knows that he was good company. One would like to have seen him off duty and to have enjoyed his wit and his healthy mind in fields other than just literary. The same cannot be said of all authors. Of Horace no doubt and John of Salisbury, of St Thomas More, perhaps Henry Fielding, and at times Samuel Johnson — it would be interesting to draw up a complete list. But many writers, and especially satirists, give the impression that they were at times difficult. With Chaucer what one critic has referred to as the "engaging rascality and infinite *bonhomie*" of his characters appears everywhere in his own work.

What was the *Parliament of Fowls* written to set forth? Was it merely a *tour de force* of wit with reference to St Valentine's Day? I confess that such an explanation seems inadequate to me. Nor in the light of the symbolism of the *Book of the Duchess* do I feel required, as an alternative, to see in it a closely knit personal allegory with identifiable references at every point. Some lady's hesitation may be represented here

as a compliment to her in terms of the eagle, but I do not think the same point could be made after wedlock. Allusions to the English parliament I believe there are. There is humor in casting the main characters as birds. Although one of the contestants makes a boast of long service, quite possibly the royal or noble figures behind the screen of symbolism were very young. That the formel eagle must have a year to decide may reflect a picturing of childhood attachments years before wedlock. We really know nothing about the meaning of the poem when it comes to the history it actually embodies. But that the bird parliament was chosen for this setting, and that all the birds gathered on this day to choose their mates with Nature as presiding officer, such a scheme has more than poetic value. Like the *House of Fame* this poem shows humor in its very conception. It may even be taken, since it deals specifically with the Court of Love, as flippant. The plot of the contending lovers, if such a motif exists, or the *demande d'amour*, is used for the special purpose of showing that in this case the rose may not be picked for yet many a day. Betrothals were attempted young in the Middle Ages. But whether we have here the story of Philippa of Lancaster or Katharine or even Elizabeth, or perhaps even the Earl of Derby (he was married about 1380), I doubt whether we shall ever know. I believe, however, that the match is projected rather than concluded, that indeed the poem represents the use of hints and suggestions to urge the lady. Here again it is not Venus who rules, in this case it is Nature. And she does not compel the formel eagle beyond endurance to make up her mind.

These poems based on the Vision of Courtly Love all show

marked differences from others of the type. Fortune rules in one; in another Fame. in the third Nature. It is true that we visit the temple of Venus early in the *House of Fame*, and we read much about her shrine, but the vital figure in the poem who controls all action is Fame herself. In the same way in the *Parliament* it is really Nature who is the dominant character. If my guess is justified, these poems all celebrate, from one angle or another, wedded-love. The vision they show does not, as in other poems of the type, tell us that Venus is favorably inclined so that the dreamer may have his *amie*. Nor does it appear that Chaucer spent much time in speculating on the allegorical appearance and conduct of fair "Cypride." In general the characters are like real people — the knight in black, the goddess Fame, the birds in the *Parliament* and the eagle in the *House of Fame*. Here we do not find elaborate displays of the plots and counterplots of Daunger, Paour, Honte, Doutance, Beauté, Honneur, Courtoisie, and the other abstractions that play about in so many allegories. When as in the *Parliament* we do get something of the sort — Plesaunce, Aray, Lust, and the other figures in the Garden of Love, with Dame Pees and Priapus and even Venus herself — it is brief and decorative, not a *psychomachia* but a tapestry as a background for the real story.

Realism affects the *dramatis personae*, the dialogue, the discourse of the eagle, the talk between the turtle and the duck, and even the technique of the dream. It sends just a breath, as we have seen, into the daintily planned garden of the *Parliament*, which otherwise belongs to the work of pigment or embroidery. There is, it is true, realism in certain other poems of the Court of Love,* notably the *Roman de la Rose*,

but not so pervasively. And with Chaucer one may notice that his genius did not take spontaneously and easily to an art of abstraction. It is evident as early as this that he cares more for people themselves than he does for generalizations about people. Given free rein he would probably never have used allegory at all; that he did adopt this method came from the fact that it was fashionable. It was the literary form to which a young man must adjust himself if he wished to be heard. But this young writer had no abstract view of life, and so he introduced material from life as he found it whenever he could. In each instance, the whole scheme of his poem is also informed with humor, which seems to prompt even the most fantastic details. Take, just for one trivial example, the lovely bit about the ladies with flowing hair who danced for ever about the temple of Love in the *Parliament*. Most of this material Chaucer got from Boccaccio, but he added one significant detail. The *Teseide* says merely the ladies were

Discinte, scalze, in capelli e in gonne,
E in ciò sol dispendevano il giorno.

Tes vii, st 57.

But Chaucer adds that this was their perpetual duty. "That was here offyce alwey, yer by yeere" (*Parl* 236.) His word "office" indeed suggests something religious, and one thinks of the Vestal Virgins. The ceremonial dance of these lovely creatures for ever continuing is delicious to contemplate. It is just the sort of final touch the poet usually adds to his borrowings, the lustre of perfection.

And yet in the structure of these poems, in their conception and accomplishment, how much is there that lays claim

to the sublime? There is undoubtedly something of this when the poet utilizes the machinery of Courtly Love to convey with a saving element of humor his sympathy for the stricken John of Gaunt. I see it also in evanescent gleams in Nature's court held to settle the affairs of the eagles, in the garden beyond that gate whose inscription holds an everlasting ambiguity. There is something of it too in the marvelous flight with the eagle up to that rarefied atmosphere where stand the shifting towers of Fame. Indeed the moment when the poet, uplifted in the talons of his lecturer, objects to further learning, might suggest a specific example of this spacious achievement, but I am afraid that the episode lacks sufficient significance within the poem and universality without it to justify appreciation on that level. I wish we could read into the allegory some meaning such as that the poet has been surfeited with study and now at last seeks the real world and the gossip of friends, but that would be poor allegory as things now stand, and it does not work out that way. But the episode itself is superb and one to be grateful for. How different such flashes of humor are from the conceits and preciosity of other poems of the Court of Love, where the values are chiefly those of sentiment! Chaucer's early poems both gain and suffer from a lack of pretentiousness in this vein, it is perfectly obvious that he has no slightest thought of creating a great work of art with universal significance. Whatever flights he might attempt in that way, laughter would keep breaking through. He is too much in fun to have time for a strenuous attempt at being a genius. Realism and humor investing a sympathetic observation of human character, these qualities mark his early poems.

Chapter III

TROILUS AND CRISEYDE

THE MANUSCRIPTS that survive of Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde* tell us more about its composition than we know about that of any other poem he wrote. A study of the variant readings shows that it was revised at least once, that Chaucer added most of the long soliloquy on predestination in Book IV and extended the Epilogue. Other changes are incidental, but all of them make it certain that he took the greatest pains with this work, and that in writing the poem he was actuated by motives of fundamental earnestness. Among his longer productions, it is in many ways his most finished achievement. If in rich maturity of conception it may be rated somewhat below the "marriage cycle" of the *Canterbury Tales*, it nevertheless attains a fuller perfection within the limits of its own purpose. Its style is at once supple and marked with astonishing vitality; every theme it introduces — and there are many — it brings to an appropriate completion. The preoccupation of its story with the concerns of youth meant perhaps a lack of range in the artistic possibilities open to the poet's imagination, but the emotional patterns fell within correspondingly easier compass. Ironies of a youthful misadventure would seem to be more steadily congenial to Chaucer, or to the people for whom he was writing, than tragic implications of disaster among an older

group. In any case the story suited his genius. It is a great poem.

If in the allegories Chaucer presented the Court of Love and its conventions somewhat humorously, he takes it seriously enough in the *Troilus*. This is no matter of wedded love; the affair is illicit enough to be kept secret, and all the mandates of love are exercised in full force. Mr. C. S. Lewis indeed has been rash enough to maintain that the poem was written in praise of this kind of thing. Chaucer himself calls it a tragedy. Presumably he might have chosen a plot where lovers who faithfully kept the rules of the game were brought to a happy ending, although as one recalls the stories of Tristram and Iseult, of Lancelot and Guinevere, of Paolo and Francesca, one may conclude that there were not many who came off on that high note of bliss. Perhaps the somber picture, the downward path, offers the more significant opportunity for a student of character. The plot, however, contains little that may be interpreted in favor of sporting with Amaryllis in the shade. On the contrary it presents a magnificent situation in terms of human weakness, and on those terms for artistic reasons alone Chaucer might have found abundant impulse for his imagination. He could heighten its qualities: enrich the lugubrious youthfulness of the lover, make Pandarus a little older to afford a better contrast to Troilus and to prevent his own failures in love from making him seem merely fatuous; and finally he could add to the complexity of his heroine's character, making her for one thing less accessible to her lover. But if the meaning of the story were utterly repugnant to him, would he have chosen it in the interests of art?

Theoretically, I suppose, a radical may write a play that preaches conservatism because it involves a fascinating problem in technique, but I do not find that thus often happens. An indifferent radical might do so perhaps, but radicals are seldom indifferent. Nor do I find conservatives setting forth revolutionary literature. In any case the story of the *Troilus* as we first come upon it in the *Roman de Troie* and again as it appears in the *Filostrato* hardly suggests the permanent values of love. Chaucer altered it to the effect of deepening the sorrows of the lover and intensifying the infidelity of the lady and ending the poem with an interpretation which should leave no doubt as to the way Courtly Love appears when last we look upon it. As it stands, the *Troilus* indubitably means that the affairs of Venus belong to human frailty, and this conclusion agrees with what he elsewhere has to say on the subject. The *Legend of Good Women* emphasizes the fickleness of men and the sufferings of their ladies quite as often as it celebrates the heroism of Cupid's saints. In the "marriage cycle" of the *Canterbury Tales*, the love that seems most admirable is surely that of the wedded Griselda and Dorigen.

"Morality, heavenly link!" as the *Bab Ballads* have it — how we all to-day shy away from that theme! For us it is associated with inflexible moral codes and unpleasant moralists. It hardly seems possible nowadays that (with saints at least) morals once seemed positive, living, and even radiant. In medieval literature it was impossible to evade considerations of this kind, and didacticism penetrated not only allegory but romance as well. Chaucer in the *Troilus* shows that he is fully aware that he cannot neglect this aspect of his

story. The Epilogue of the poem was added to interpret the plot against a Christian background. Starting with hints in Boccaccio the poet appealed to youth to turn from worldly love to love celestial, and he added the prayer to the triune God. Later he inserted the stanzas from Boccaccio's *Teseide* describing the flight of Arcite's soul, transferring them, of course, to Troilus, in order to give the young man the sort of bird's-eye view of life that, we remember, he himself had had in the *House of Fame*. It must be salutary to view life from the hereafter, it is certainly most helpful to look at love from a safe distance. And from the detachment of the eighth sphere, Troilus sees his own love affair and his tragedy as mere items in the news of the universe, as details in the history of human folly. The affairs of the Court of Love end this way after all. There are far greater concerns. The laugh of Troilus, as he looks back on all this, may not be ironical or bitter, but it is a laugh. And it is almost the first time Chaucer has told us of anything of the kind from his young hero.

I am afraid that modern critics do not like this laugh very much. It is a great pity. It came down through Boccaccio all the way from Lucan's *Pharsalia*; and Chaucer took the trouble to add it at this point where he must have been aware that it would have great importance. The last thing we hear from this young lover after all is not a sonnet, not a *planctus* to his lady, not a paean to those rapturous hours at the house of Pandarus, but a laugh. This is what is likely to stay in the memory. It is most disconcerting. But, first of all, let us be grateful for the fact that mirth at this moment in the poem robs it of sentimentality. If Chaucer adds a moral, he is not

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smug or complacent about it. And I believe the chief reason for a modern critic's dislike of this laugh is that he perceives it is also Chaucer's laugh, and that is another matter. We do not like to find the poet laughing at the tragedy, or the love affair, or especially that wonderful night of love at the house of Pandarus, a scene too exquisite to discount for moral considerations. It vexes the sense of beauty to be told that beauty was not all truth on that occasion. We would remind Geoffrey Chaucer that even he was stirred at the thought of the union of these irresistible lovers. Even he, the poet, rejoiced in the passion of his young hero, and perceptibly felt the soft delight of Cressid's lovely form. The poet's own thoughts were at least as daring as Troilus even after Pandarus bore away the candle to the chimney:

{ Hire armes smale, hire streghte bak and softe,
Hire sydes longe, flesshly, smothe, and white
He gan to stroke

III, 1247-1249

Yes, but the poet's imagination was there first. These words go beyond anything we find in Boccaccio, and I feel certain that Chaucer exulted when Troilus took his lady in his arms and bade her yield.

But unfortunately that cannot be the only emotion he cherished in this scene. At the very time when the lovers are united, the poet knew what were going to be the fruits of this event. Could this blessed moment have been prolonged, then all were well. But these lovers are not married, they are living by the rules of the Court of Love, and furthermore they have the weaknesses of human nature. Even during

Criseyde's most passionate avowal of confidence and surrender, Chaucer knew that she would betray her lover and that before many moons she would be in the arms of another man. So against a greater background all this loveliness has a quite different coloring. There is the coming of the day upon ~~this~~ love-scene, heralded by Troilus's lines that make us think of Romeo's supreme poetry at a corresponding time:

"O cruel day, accusour of the joie
That nyght and love han stole and faste iwryen,
Acorsed be thi comyng into Troye . . ."

III, 1450-1452.

"Look, love, what envious streaks . . .!" But Criseyde too has expressed herself in similar vein about the "rake nyght," and later she gives her devotion to Diomedes, and despite her reassuring words, perhaps to another after that. And Troilus is killed in battle, not in a superb combat — nothing grand happened¹ — but just like any other man. So after all one may laugh as one looks back over the course of events even to the blissful moments of the night so long sought for by the twain. The laugh requires no bitterness or irony; only a sense of proportion. Chaucer is never destructive.

It is not with him a question of kindness breaking through a sterner purpose; his philosophy is kindly. So here he would say, I think, that the love of Troilus is ultimately frustrated, but it is definitely as good as far as it goes. It is not to be confused with the "blynde lust" (blind pleasure) which he later condemns, to which Troilus and Cressid yield in their longing for each other; and which has to do with the

self-indulgence of passion. When the hero and heroine make simply an episode of their love, then its significance is cheapened. But potentially, as Troilus himself so buoyantly sang, it is the same as the love that turns the sun and the other stars, it might have had a sacramental permanence, and we may well rejoice in its potentialities and its beauty.

The scene at the house of Pandarus has also another significance, I think. It shows that Chaucer had a normal interest and delight in human passion. There is so much in his later writing to suggest matrimonial bitterness, and in one way or another he so often suggests his own ill-success in love, that before long some critic will probably make psychological deductions not favorable to the poet's normal outlook upon life. There are several stories where he refers to a more or less bestial variety of satisfaction. Here at least he gives a picture of two lovers meeting in a union that (whatever be the fulness of their passion) in and for itself is wholly untainted, wholly beautiful, with an extraordinary lyric quality in its presentation, and a vitality that carries it with a splendid sweep. Of all this, however, I shall have more to say later. Now I may simply add that the perfection of this picture is not only of value for itself but contributes enormously to the tragedy when it comes — the lover, the more appealing, the scene where Troilus and Criseyde are united, the darker and more grievous the destruction of all this by infidelity.

I admit, I think quite freely, the beauty of this scene. And I believe trouble is caused in criticism because the modern is afraid that we must ignore the full value of all this if we grant moral considerations any validity at all. To protect us from

that he is likely to form his interpretation of the poem on a radically different basis. He will reject the evidence of those stanzas where the poet has unmistakably declared a Christian philosophy. The result is an interpretation which is different from the poet's. The love scene in Book III, your critic will argue, is wholly admirable, that is the part that Chaucer really cared about. Whatever conflicts with that must have been added for some artistically unworthy motive, and so we find ourselves in the presence of an attack on the poet himself. This, however adroitly concealed or overlooked, is really of first importance. Chaucer, we may be told, was fundamentally not serious. Matthew Arnold said as much years ago for reasons of his own, and he is quoted approvingly by Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch, who nevertheless proceeds to admit that the closing stanzas of the *Troilus* have high seriousness. Another writer has urged that the poet was at heart a cynic, following conventional morality (with uncomfortable hypocrisy) in early life and breaking forth with his true nature in after years in that unrestrained revelry of composition which is the *Wife of Bath*. The dividing line comes at about the time of the *Troilus*. The Epilogue shows the poet's pretence of high and noble things; the frankly sensual poem reveals the real man underneath. For the moment I may simply remark that there is nothing in the portrayal of the *Wife of Bath* that implies a cynical attitude toward life in Chaucer himself, and, even if there were, the *Franklin's Tale* would serve to balance the view.

Closely related to the accusation that the poet was cynical, is the charge that he was unconcerned about moral issues, and revelled irresponsibly in the emotional ups and downs

of his characters, regardless of what they all meant. Why not? the modern may ask, who regards anything else as superstition and irrelevance. But a critic of that type is himself a cynic and can see no important significance in art except as entertainment. For such a reader the Epilogue is a sop to the pious. *Troilus and Criseyde* is for him an experience rather than an idea. And then there is another theory that closes the door to criticism. Chaucer, we are told, was of his own age, and into his thinking we may scarcely penetrate, partly because that was restricted by various limitations now difficult to bear in mind or even to imagine as we attempt to reconstruct his views. A critic of this stamp will accept what he finds in fourteenth-century literature without attempting to explain or understand it. When a long discourse appears in a work, he will say that such a digression seems absurd now but men in those days wrote in a fashion that we can hardly hope to understand. Perhaps they liked to be sententious or edifying; at any rate it is a blemish and we will pass it by.

Obviously all these points involve matter of the greatest importance for our understanding of Chaucer's genius and also of his character. If he wrote only for entertainment, if the moral patterns of life did not enter his aesthetic scheme, if art to him is in no sense a matter of illumination or insight, then I would insist that his production belongs on a level below that of great genius. If he is fundamentally cynical, and if we mean by the term that he had no belief in the ultimate significance of anything, then I find his art spurious. He will shift from satire to sentimentality unconcerned as to how valid what he offers may be. For if he sees meaning in life,

what is an experience must also be an idea. Ultimately he is bound to estimate the love affair of Troilus not only as a thing of beauty but as a cause with effects and an effect of causes. If we really cannot read Chaucer's intention in his works, then we can hardly criticize them adequately. To say that we are hopelessly prone to read into the poet's mind and into the thoughts of his characters the ideas of our own period is hardly worth the utterance, on its own terms it is insecure. For if Chaucer is a genius and his characters truly live, then they are proper stuff for the researches of the most modern criticism and psychology with direct reference to life. If the poet's wisdom and humor seem the richer in the light of a modern approach, then there is a strong chance that this method is getting at the truth. To be specific, where we deny that Chaucer could have regarded something as comic or ironic (since in his day men commonly took a solemn view of such things), we forget the perennial insight of humor — humor, that is, in a genius of serious purpose.

At first sight readers may be quite perplexed by the tone of the *Troilus*. The verses weep as he writes, says the poet. He is to tell the double sorrow of Troilus, how the young man went from woe to weal and from weal to woe in his love affair. Only the Fury Tisiphone may be invoked for such a tale. Well, it hardly sounds the really tragic motif, does it? The orchestra does not strike the deeper notes at all. A gloomy face befits a sorrowful narrative, yes, but isn't someone pulling it a bit long? The mood seems to be reflected even in what he says about that most sacred of subjects, love *paramours*.

For I, that God of Loves servantz serve,
 Ne dar to Love, for myn unliklynesse,
 Preyen for speed, al sholde I therfore sterve,
 So fer am I from his help in derknesse . .

1, 15-18

and so on. Need I say, he certainly did not expect to die: The bidding prayer that comes later, and all the apparatus of the Church of Love, even to Troilus's litany in distress to the gods, are in harmony with the peculiar humor of this type of machinery in Court of Love literature; but here in the present background in relation to the tone of the poem as a whole it seems peculiarly apt. An almost jocular note creeps in at times.

The dayes honour, and the hevenes ye,
 The nightes foo — al this clepe I the sonne —

11, 904-905

Such an expression is not out of place in the *Knight's Tale*, the *Merchant's Tale*, or the *Franklin's Tale*, but on the face of things, isn't it a little odd in a tragedy? Of course we know that Chaucer customarily has a pleasant manner, and likes to dig his reader in the ribs now and then, but certainly these verses do not weep. The puns too on the names of Troy and Calchas, how out of place one might consider them! The poet seems to be thoroughly enjoying himself, with a strange detachment, in narrating the sad course of events in this his "little tragedy." Was he really untouched by what happened? I have already confessed that I think he was moved, far more, I may now add, than in the *Knight's Tale*, where at times the mood is similar. The fact is that his poem is shot

through, iridescent, with irony. It is not somber or grave; it is managed with a light touch. But it is irony none the less, and for a proper understanding of the lines we must see it when it appears.

Why then does he adopt this manner in the *Troilus*? The reason is, I think, that he is dealing with youth and with the affairs of youth, which are after all on a different level from that of great tragedy. *Troilus* shows, it is true, the classic flaw, ἀμαρτία, human frailty, but his is a rather general weakness as young men go. He has hardly more than the pride of youth and early passions. The logic of his case hardly calls for disintegration of character and final destruction. It is in harmony with this view and with the tone of the poem that neither he nor Diomedes kills the other; that indeed nothing magnificent occurred. His laugh at the end is in the same key. Chaucer's manner has been described elsewhere as that of sympathetic irony, and the phrase is exact. From beginning to end in telling this story the speaker's voice suits the attitude which is expressed in the Epilogue. "Swich fyn hath, lo, this Troilus for love!" (v, 1828). His "grete worthynesse," "his estat real," and "his noblesse," they all come to the same end. The poet has sometime before expressed his regret, it is true, that Cressid bestowed Troilus's gift on Diomedes, and comments that "that was litel nede"; he says he would excuse Cressid's falseness, if he could, just out of pity. But these things are incidental, and sink out of significance before the larger view we obtain at the end of the poem. In short the tragic mood of the poem is one which suits the age of the participants in the story, without, however, any trace of condescension.

In the light of such considerations can anyone doubt how we are to interpret the poem as a whole? Certain passages in the love-scene and others even earlier have been taken to afford a direct inconsistency with the Epilogue. Let us examine some of these:

Forthy ensample taketh of this man,
Ye wise, proude, and worthi folkes alle,
To scornen Love, which that so soone kan
The fredom of youre hertes to hym thralle,
For evere it was, and evere it shal by falle,
That love is he that alle thing may bynde,
For may no man fordon the lawe of kynde
1, 232-238

This, of course, is merely an expression of the controlling power of passion — a fact that no one in the Middle Ages would deny, whether the ecclesiast or the scholastic philosopher. If you give yourself up to this passion, then, alas, the end may be like that of Troilus. The Epilogue neatly caps this very passage with specific allusion, it would almost seem, to the wise and proud and worthy. Such was the end, we are there told, of our hero's "grete worthynesse" and all the rest of it. But what of another passage in the poem that seems to furnish an even greater inconsistency? There we read:

Thei callen love a woodnesse or folie,
But it shal falle hem as I shal yow rede,
They shal forgon the white and ek the rede,
And lyve in wo, ther God yeve hem meschaunce,
And every love in his trouthe avaunce!
III, 1382-1386.

This stands in even more violent contrast, one might infer, to the lines in the Epilogue where Chaucer altered a passage of the *Filostrato* to read as follows

O yonge, fresshe folkes, he or she,
In which that love up groweth with youre age,
Repeyreth hom fro worldly vanyte,
And of youre herte up casteth the visage
To thilke God that after his ymage
Yow made, and thynketh al nys but a faire
This world, that passeth soone as floures faire

v, 1835-1841.

But are we to suppose that, when Chaucer made his careful revision of the poem, he let a glaring inconsistency stand? If we had to choose, could we doubt which passage represents the deeper, the considered view of the situation? Or shall we suppose that the poet's nature is divided between the two attitudes here revealed so that fundamentally he could not decide which was the nearer to the truth? Of course in the general tone of the poem it is plain that the first passage is lightly ironic and the second is directly sincere. We do not really have to question both the poet's personal integration and his artistic honesty if we recognize the fact that Chaucer deals with Troilus's love in somewhat the same way as he deals with the young man himself. Let no one suppose that either is unimportant! Beware of taking this matter of love too flippantly: behold what it has done to our young hero, who mourns the livelong day and at night sleeps no more than does the nightingale! Nay, he wallows and weeps like Niobe the Queen!

The poem is perfectly unified on these terms. It is not fair

to cite as a parallel such works as the sonnets of Petrarch, where at one time the poet expresses devotion to Laura, at another accuses her of separating him from God. Such sentiments are of the extravagances of love, and sonnets in any case hardly require the unity of a story. The fact is, the whole structure of the *Troilus* shows that Chaucer left nothing to chance or inconsistency in its arrangement. He was far too much in earnest about its composition, which in the proems, the interweaving of borrowings, the use of Boethius, the development of the characters, the lyrics introduced, shows the most painstaking attention to detail. Thoughtful readers have noted the intricacy of its pattern. Not adequately observed, however, has been the symmetry, the balance, of its episodes and use of material. I may therefore mention a few examples to show how conscious the poet was, at every moment, of the problem of disposing his material effectively and to the point. Hector, touched by Criseyde's beauty, urges her to stay in Troy, and, when her father makes the move later to get her exchanged for Antenor, it is Hector again who works in her behalf to keep her in the city. Pandarus comes in when Troilus bewails his new and hopeless love, it is Pandarus again in Book IV who comes in to find the hero in despair at Criseyde's leaving. Troilus sings of his love in Book I, and again in despair in Book V, the lovers exchange letters at the beginning of their affair, and again after their separation; the ladies are reading of Thebes in Book II, and Cassandra expounds the story in Book V, Criseyde dreams of her newly found love, and later Troilus dreams of his lady's infidelity; it may even not be fanciful to see in Diomedes's offer to be Criseyde's brother

a parallel to Criseyde's earlier offer to be a sister to Troilus. And finally, as a student suggests to me, Troilus begins by smiling at love and lovers, and ends in the skies laughing at about the same thing. These and other instances, and even parallels within the episodes, offer an important means of achieving dramatic irony. It is easy to compare the original vows of hero and heroine with what they actually do later. One may contrast the love-scene itself, and its attendant comment on people who dispraise love, with the story as a whole and the comment in the Epilogue. This type of inconsistency is, as many examples in literature show, of the very essence of irony. Thus the dreams of the glory of kingship and power shared by Lord and Lady Macbeth stand in contradiction to their ultimate suspicions, murder, and frustration. So too the joyful devotion of Othello and Desdemona finds contradiction in the jealousy that snuffs it out. When Tristram and Iseult drink the love-potion and gaze into each others eyes, the scene has lasting beauty but derives color from the subsequent tragedy. A fundamental inconsistency in the *Troilus* would be an amazing breach in a poem where every part has been planned so closely with reference to every other part.

There is symmetry in the framework of the poem as a whole. Troilus sins against the Court of Love by his youthful arrogance and he suffers for it, in the Christian setting he sins in his dalliance with love *paramours* and he suffers for it. Criseyde sins against the Court of Love by infidelity and suffers for it, in the Christian setting as well she sins like Troilus, only far more grievously, and she makes a greater retribution. Criseyde's sin of infidelity is greater from both

points of view than any other, and the deeper effect on her character is obvious. "To Diomedé algate I wol be trewe" shows that this lovely creature, who had taken pride in always facing the facts, now longs desperately to deceive herself. It is a sinister warning of things that may yet occur. Incidentally we may observe that the sins include those that mark great tragedies, pride and disloyalty. And when I study the characters in more detail, I hope to show that Pandarus too shares in the moral scheme I have just indicated. There may be some question, on the other hand, whether dalliance with love may properly be included among the sins according to the medieval way of dealing with such things. In fact certain modern studies have found the Middle Ages rather confused on the subject, divided between a pagan and Christian view, with the Christian view itself far from clear. Since this is precisely the charge that has been brought against Chaucer and the *Troilus* I may be pardoned for dwelling on it for a moment.

(There were of course the remains of a pagan tradition of love in medieval writings. According to this view the worship of Venus and Cupid was a diversion, as we see in the various works of Ovid that were read and translated and imitated during the period. With the troubadours and the *dolce styl nuovo* this conception of love was exalted to the position of holding that it may ennoble human character, and indeed that it is most at home in the noble heart. According to Christianity, human love between the sexes was consecrated in the sacrament of matrimony and is therefore, as with any other sacrament, the channel of divine grace. It is not, however, the highest form of devotion to which human beings

may aspire, since the love of God must naturally come first. Within these limitations, therefore, love according to Christianity is never sinful. When the Wife of Bath cries out "Allas! allas! that evere love was synne" (D. 614), she is speaking broadly. Outside of matrimony if it is expressed in passion, and if the individual yields to his passion, it may have sinful effects. The sin is not love, but lust — which is really a sin against love. Also it is possible that certain individuals may have a vocation for a singlehearted devotion to the love of God, and for them the sacrament of matrimony becomes an inferior channel of grace or even an obstacle. The world would probably have been the loser if St Benedict or St Francis had married and settled down to quiet domestic living. This, however, is not to say that everyone has a vocation of this kind; for in some cases an individual through pride, fancying himself one of the great saints, may aspire to the celibate life although he is not fitted for it. Possible confusion in all this can lie, not in the theory — which, right or wrong, is as clear as day — but in the individual's own decision as to where his own vocation is to be found.

The *Troilus*, which actually presents a classical story in a medieval setting, is perfectly clear on the same terms. The hero and the heroine might have married, but they chose not to; and against the Christian background they indubitably sinned, not in their love but in yielding to their passion. Their love on Christian terms is a potential good, but in the technique of the Court of Love it becomes trivial and is betrayed. On the other hand, when Chaucer adjures young folk to repair home "fro worldly vanitee" to the love of God, he

can hardly mean to advocate celibacy for everyone; the sacrament of matrimony is not wholly vanity according to Christian teaching. If it should be said, therefore, that the poem is written in praise of love one might not have to demur entirely; yet one must quite definitely understand that Courtly Love is not what is meant thereby. And even so we must observe that the emphasis of the poem falls more on the failure of Courtly Love than it does on the benefits received from love itself. *Troilus* is transformed for the better by his devotion to *Criseyde*, but after his downfall he sings another tune.

2

It is not commonly understood that *Criseyde* sinned even before her infidelity. Chaucer is avowedly a writer who prefers not to judge the lady, as temperamentally he is one who sees things with justice but does not condemn. Yet no writer who presents reality can evade a precise judgment of his characters unless he selects only an instant out of their lives to study. Development in successive episodes must in part be based on judgment. *Pandarus* and *Criseyde* both show a full awareness of the social aspect of what they are about in moving toward the love-scene. They are, as we are often told, fourteenth-century figures, they are taken up with Courtly Love; the background is Christian despite the pagan deities named, and that is why the love affair must be kept secret. Secrecy, although of course expedient when an injured husband was in the offing, was a tenet of the Court of Love partly because love *paramours* was a violation of Christian morality and it received therefore a social condemna-

tion. It is kept in the *Troilus* even where the lover has nothing to fear from an outraged husband. Criseyde shows her awareness of the true nature of her case when she complains of Pandarus.

"Allas! what sholden straunge to me doon,
When he, that for my beste frend I wende,
Ret me to love, and sholde it me defende"

II, 411-413

She goes on to say that Pandarus would have had no mercy on her if she had given her love to Achilles or some other man. She is not here concerned with the violation of her widowhood or with the idea that her love will become generally known. And Pandarus himself, not a man of spiced conscience, has his own qualms:

"And were it wist that I, thorough myn engyn,
Hadde in my nece yput this fantasie,
To doon thi lust and holly to ben thyn,
Whi, al the world upon it wolde crie,
And seyn that I the werste trecherie
Dide in this cas, that evere was bigonne,
And she forlost, and thow right nought ywonne"

III, 274-280.

The root of the difficulty is not the exposure, but that anyone who knew of the amour would condemn Pandarus for leading the lovers into it. Pandarus has no doubts, and neither has Criseyde. True it is that except for questions of decorum Criseyde herself has little concern for what people think about morality. Moral issues play no part in her decision regarding her lover. But from the point of view of a Christian social order Criseyde would be judged, and she

obviously knows what the judgment would be. For practical purposes what guides her is thought of the effect on her immediate happiness. Can she, dare she, take the risk? Well, as she says, —

“ . . . He which that nothing undertaketh
 Nothyng n'acheveth ”

II, 807-808

Now this is exactly what Diomedes says when later he comes a-wooing:

“ For he that naught n'asaeth, naught n'acheveth ”

V, 784

This is one more of the astonishing parallels in the poem. Cressid and Diomedes are well mated. The religion of Pandarus, Criseyde, and Diomedes, has a ritual of utilitarian proverbs.

But Mr. Lowes has brilliantly maintained that Cressid's yielding to Troilus happened “al bisyde hire leve” (II, 622) — as Chaucer says of the storm and of her consenting to stay at the house of Pandarus. In my opinion it is simply not so. She had choice in the matter of going to the house of Pandarus, she had choice as to whether she would admit Pandarus and later Troilus to her room, she had choice as to whether she would admit Troilus to her bed, and also as to whether, once he was there, she would stay there herself. The compulsion of circumstance varies in degree in each of these instances, but never in any of them is she completely subject to the moment. The degree of her consent is delicately managed, we admit, so that she has almost nothing to do. This is a method that suits her temperament admirably.

She is given to fear, it is almost her dominating characteristic and it is based on her fundamental sense of insecurity and on her personal egoism. On the other hand, when need is, she is quite explicit to Troilus as to her reasons for surrender, although her reasons differ amazingly from the considerations on which she actually pondered when facing her choice, yet she wants her lover at least to believe that she has given herself freely.

Criseyde's process in deciding to go to Pandarus's house is much like her acceptance of the letter from Troilus. If it is thrust into her bosom she will accept it — and read it. The first episode is a commentary on the later one. Pandarus knows his niece, and now that the time is ripe he has warned the lovers that he will arrange a meeting for them at his house:

"But I conjure the, Criseyde, and oon,
And two, thow Troilus, whan thow mayst goon,
That at myn hous ye ben at my warnynge,
For I ful well shal shape youre comynge "

III, 193-196

From his management of the meeting at the house of Deiphebus a timid girl might have suspected that Pandarus would accomplish this somewhat as a surprise, certainly anyone as shrewd as Criseyde shows herself to be in those marvelous interchanges of undecieving deception between uncle and niece. She might even expect that in the later meeting with Troilus there would be a parallel to the elaborate story of Poliphete's conspiracy (for which the discussion was held), and she would not be disappointed, for we now have the elaborate lie about Horaste. And if Criseyde felt any interest

in Troilus, she would be a little stupid if she did not look forward to some move of this sort on the part of her uncle. Now as a matter of fact, as the scene develops, she shows definitely that she has been looking for it. Pandarus offers his invitation; Criseyde at once suggests that it is going to rain and is doubtful about going. Pandarus presses his request more urgently, whereupon Criseyde

. . . gan to hym to rowne,
And axed hym if Troilus were there.

III, 568-569

Her uncle swears that the young man will not be there; indeed Pandarus wouldn't have the fellow seen there.

Nought list myn auctour fully to declare
What that she thoughte whan he seyde so,
That Troilus was out of towne yfare,
As if he seyde therof soth or no

III, 575-578

Can anyone miss the peculiarly Chaucerian quality of this passage? Of course the poet leaves the question open. One must read the lady's mind for oneself. How can the author pry into it? Criseyde accepts, yes,

But natheles, yet gan she hym biseche,
Although with hym to gon it was no fere,
For to ben war of goosish poeples speche,
That dremen thynges whiche that nevere were . . .

III, 582-585

But she wants to be sure that all is well:

And seyde hym, "Em, syn I most on yow triste.
Loke al be wel, and do now as yow liste"

« III, 587-588.

Even on the face of it her consent is here. Well, Pandarus was not born yesterday. He swears a great and complicated oath that she may trust him; knowing her uncle as she does, she can read enough in that protest. Everything follows as it should, the fates do their part, the rain comes down, and Cressid stays. I will concede, freely enough, that for us the rain may symbolize the pressure of natural forces operating in the world, and some of its steamy life urges the desire of the fair heroine. But it would be nearer the facts to say that Criseyde was almost deterred by the rain from going to meet her lover, that she went in spite of the downpour after she guessed that Troilus was indeed there.

Of this episode Mr. de Selincourt has observed that Pandarus "takes it for granted that fear of discovery is the reason for her reluctance, and in the end she consents to come, though she knows, of course, why she has been invited." Fear of discovery doubtless has something to do with it, but it is partly fear of discovery to herself. The bedroom scene is still another parallel, and shows her in the same light. She is a lady who wants to yield to destiny — and then to put the blame on destiny. If such were not the case she might have cut off all thought of her affair with Troilus long ago. Before this, we read, Troilus

. . . say his lady somtyme, and also
She with hym spak, whan that she dorst and leste;
And by hire bothe avys, as was the beste,
Apoynteden full warly in this nede,
So as they durste, how they wolde procede

But why does Chaucer give us all this elaborate account of the preparation for the meeting in such extraordinary detail? Why does not Criseyde make her own appointment and go torch in hand to meet her lover? Surely, when she kissed him at the house of Deiphebus, she had a notion of what was ahead. Without doubt the fine process of her yielding is as lovely to watch as it was delicious to Criseyde. But can anyone think that it exhibits merely the pressure of circumstance by which a wholly virtuous lady is reduced to submission? Is Cressid the victim of one rainy night? Surely in that case it is dangerous for a girl to step forth without an eye to the weather! The poem teaches at least that much. Why did Chaucer display with such care the details of her growing consent to come to supper in the first place if the simple fact is that she had no slightest suspicion of what was involved — and no responsibility in going? I am afraid that if Chaucer really meant us to think that Cressid is guilt-free he has managed it very badly. "It is," continues Mr. de Selincourt, "the picture, not of a coquette, but of a woman pitifully weak" — this with reference to her negotiations with Diomedes, but it is the same lady now. When Troilus knelt at her bedside, she might have gathered about her the garments of maidenly reserve and adopted for the nonce something of "daunger" from the Court of Love. But Chaucer says that she seemed to forget discretion — he hardly knows why — and even kissed the young man:

Kan I naught seyn, for she bad hym nought rise,
 If sorwe it putte out of hire remembraunce,
 Or elles that she took it in the wise
 Of dewete, as for his observaunce,

But wel fynde I she dede hym this plesaunce
 That she hym kiste, although she siked sore,
 And bad hym sitte adown withouten more

III, 967-973.

To this again is parallel the later part of the episode when Troilus has recovered from his swoon and lies in her bed:

hire thoughte tho no fere,
 Ne cause ek non, to bidde hym thennes rise.

III, 1144-1145

Why should we rush in to judge, when the poet himself hesitates? The fact is, however, that Chaucer never shows any real doubts about his heroine's responsibility. The long and complicated account of her slow yielding shows quite definitely that in her hesitation she is actuated a little by the principle of "daunger" or what a generation or so ago might have called feminine modesty, and again a little more by fear of discovery, and considerably by fear of the consequences to her happiness, and this in part has to do with public censure if she is found out

Yet it may be asked whether her own indifference to moral issues does not entirely exonerate her from guilt. She sees no wrong involved in loving Troilus "Such is the way of an adulterous woman," says the *Book of Proverbs*, "she eateth, and wipeth her mouth, and saith I have done no wickedness." Criseyde is not adulterous, and she is aware that there is something wrong about giving herself to her lover. She once rebuked Pandarus, as we have seen, for counselling her to love, when he should be the first to refuse her the privilege. Her indifference means simply that she intends to be a

law to herself, and that certainly does not excuse her. She knew the social standards of her time. Chaucer has not let himself waver for the moment and depict a heroine of pagan morality. That we find her charming and forgive her, that Chaucer himself finds her charming and rejoices in her love, does not bear on the question in the least. We hear her lovely banter with her uncle:

"Fox that ye ben! God yeve youre herte kare!
God help me so, ye caused al this fare. . . ."

III, 1565-1566

But this is the same lady as that who later writes to Troilus the needless and cruel lie:

". . . I have ek understonde
How ye ne do but holden me in honde "

V, 1614-1615.

Her immediate disavowal of faith in this only poisons it the more. Doubtless she thinks she is tempering the accusation, but she has made it first. Incidentally the stanza has a light air of confusion which Criseyde often adopts. Despite her determination to think things clearly through, she is a little 'upset at times when she talks to others. She knows not what to say, what do they want of her' and so on. The parallel in this vein runs through the three scenes: that first of Pandarus's telling her of her new suitor, that again at the house of Deiphebus; and finally that of the night at the house of Pandarus:

"Now em," quod she, "what wolde ye devise?
What is youre reed I sholde don of this?"

II, 388-389.

"I' what?" quod she, "by God and by my trouthe,
I not nat what ye wilne that I seye."

III, 120-121.

"I am, til God me better mynde sende,
At dulcarnoun, right at my wittes ende"

III, 930-931

It is the confusion of a lady who wishes someone else to manage things and also to take the blame.

3

In some ways Chaucer's portrait of Troilus is the harshest feature of the poem. We first see him strutting up and down the temple, like a young blood in medieval St Paul's. His arrogance, his sneers at lovers, his taunts, are harmless enough in human terms. Physically he is well proportioned, well knit, attractive to look at, and I cannot find that he exploits his charms as Diomedes so skilfully manages to do later. His access of lover's malady, his pining in distress, all these symptoms are comprehensible enough. But there is little on the other side to balance the unrelieved pathos of his rôle. Even when he clips and kisses fair Criseyde there is little humor in his speech, his face is filled with bliss rather than happiness. As the successful lover, it is true, he is transformed outwardly for a while, he becomes the friendliest of fellows and one could wish his achievement, however immoral, might be prolonged because it so much improves his manners. But in general his solemnity in contrast to the liveliness of Pandarus, his constant complaints against Fate or Fortune which reach a climax in his involved and tortuous soliloquy, his

frequent laments, all offer a picture that suits too perfectly the long pathos of his betrayal. Unlike Chaucer's young Squire we do not hear him whistling or fluting all the day. The natural health of youth does not balance his moods.

Mr. Lewis has attempted to explain the picture on the ground that it is Chaucer's purpose to develop this theme of pathos. Pity, as we know from the poet's repeated expression of the sentiment, is an emotion of the noble heart. I must pause for a moment, therefore, to consider how much Chaucer seems to have enjoyed pathos for its own sake. He was, we know, fed on the sweet commiserations of Court of Love literature early in his career. Early he began the pathetic narratives which one day he assigned to the Monk in the pilgrimage. He was touched sufficiently by the adventures of Constance and Virginia to retell their sufferings. He liked the story of the little clergeoun enough to give it to the Prioress. Above all he cared to take over almost unchanged the spectacle of the "forpynded" Griselda, whose mission seems chiefly to stir the reader to lacrimose reflections on life and its tests. It has even been said that the luxury of this sort of grief dominated the poet's interest, that like Euripides, Dickens, and others who do not shy away from sentimental values, he sought the fount of pathos whenever possible. But I find the emotional effect in all his works rather different from sentimentality. The poet's irony does not exclude pity, but it suffuses and transmutes it, notably in the setting given to it in the story of Griselda with its Envoy. He turns the brief tragedies over to the Monk, whose piety is, we see, formed on that kind of pity, and the Host offers a salutary comment:

“ . pardee, no remedie
It is for to biwaille ne complevne
That that is doon, and als it is a peyne,
As ye han seyde, to heere of hevynesse ”

B 3974-3977.

The consequent sullen reply of the Monk shows that Chaucer knew what sentimentalism soured was like. The pathos of Constance, Virginia, and the little clergeoun, is not unrelieved for in these cases it takes on the serenity of virtue and the celestial. Rebellious grief might have appeared in the *Knight's Tale* in the death of Arcite, but there we know, by comparing the story with the *Teseide*, the poet has reduced the clement of pathos and increased the touches of something very close to humor. I would not, of course, imply that Chaucer did not know the full meaning of genuine pity for suffering; his charitable outlook and his understanding of human nature belie the possibility. But long stretches of pathos for its own sake do not appear in his works and are certainly not characteristic of his genius.

What then is the artistic significance of the sad case of young Troilus? In the light of Pandarus's attitude, his ridicule and his exhortations to brace up, I hardly think the hero's complaints are meant to stir us deeply, at least in the first part of the poem. Later they have in one instance a lyric value, namely in the ode to the empty house after Cressid's departure. "O thow lanterne of which queynt is the light," "And farwel shrync, of which the seynt is oute!" (v, 540 ff.) These are good figures, and Wordsworth, moved by the poetry, modernized the whole passage. But it is the scene itself which inevitably carries the poetry with it. One thinks

of a corresponding picture in Meredith's *Diana of the Crossways*: "There stood the house. Absolutely empty! thought Redworth. The sound of the gate-bell he rang was like an echo to him. The gate was unlocked. He felt a return of his queer churchyard sensation when walking up the garden-path, in the shadow of the house. . . . Anticipating the blank silence, he rang the house-bell. It seemed to set wagging a weariful tongue in a corpse. . . ." In this case the house was not really so deserted as it looked, but the effect is the same. It was only yesterday that Walter de la Mare wrote:

"Is there anybody there?" said the Traveller,
Knocking on the moonlit door .

and the phantom listeners in the lone house "Stood listening in the quiet of the moonlight." The very idea of the desolate house in the *Troilus* is a sufficient appeal to experience for us to lend a willing response. But one may compare for poignant effect the familiar stanzas in the seventh canto of *In Memoriam*:

Dark house, by which once more I stand
Here in the long unlovely street,
Doors, where my heart was used to beat
So quickly, waiting for a hand . . .

Chaucer's lines on Cressid's empty house have a subtle variety in the quality of the vowel-sounds and in the rhythmic beat, but the scene is trivial compared with Tennyson's picture. We cannot forget that the lady in the *Troilus* has simply gone out of town and that she is shortly to take another lover. The pathos of young *Troilus*, I fear, lacks its full measure of dignity, and so I find it does again and again

until he is relieved of the burden of the flesh. Chaucer's fourteenth-century audience may have wept over the lover's woe, but the poet himself clearly saw the drama from another level, "In convers letyng everich element," a little lower than the angels no doubt but at least as high as the eighth sphere.

But still we have not explained the meaning of the linked pathos long drawn out of the hero's career. In order to understand it we must, I am convinced, judge his case in terms of a creature of flesh and blood, and that I believe to be possible. For no matter how far Chaucer utilized the conventional and borrowed from sources, his characters are living and must be so criticized. We have admitted that Troilus has been controlled by the tenets of the Court of Love; and in discussing his winning of Cressid through the intermediary of Pandarus modern critics have been inclined to exonerate him for his ineffectual qualities by saying that he is a typical lover of the Court of Love. The excuse will not serve. Troilus is a living human being. As that of a youth distinguished in the wars, athletic and virile, his desire for Criseyde should normally call forth his manliness so that he would go straight after his lady without waiting for some friend to help him out. No matter how many treatises told him that as a convert to Courtly Love he should lie for a time and wallow and weep like Niobe the Queen, normally he could have endured no such restrictions where the lady was free and accessible. Even his shame at having to retract his sneers at love and lovers could not have counted for much so long as his affair in any case had to be conducted secretly. At most it would have evoked a boyish grin and a little awkwardness. At the very least he would have achieved an interview with his lady at

once if he had shown the usual responses to stimuli. But Troilus goes to bed and bursts into tears; he lets a friend drag the secret from him, manage his wooing, dictate his first letter, arrange the meetings, and finally push him into bed with his *amie* telling him not to faint this time! Now I maintain that Chaucer knew and liked young men. He must have known that a fellow of Troilus's healthy type would go after his own prey, and that such indeed was part of the joy of this game.

All the rules of Courtly Love in a thousand handbooks do not explain the hero's lassitude before his first union with the lady, nor does the form of the story in Boccaccio, which Chaucer might quite readily have changed (and often did change). It is the hypothesis of the story, yes, but how could any realistic writer leave it so? In the *Merchant of Venice*, *Hamlet*, and elsewhere Shakespeare found the hypothesis of his story difficult to manage realistically, but that was his task, in *Troilus and Cressida* he hurried over and avoided the full problem of Pandarus in this matter. The fact is that Troilus's habit of turning over his wooing to another man is in agreement with his nature all through Chaucer's story. Many readers have objected to his weakness in letting Cressid leave Troy, but he shows the same feature on that occasion. In terms of real life he wants to be in part controlled by circumstance, in part responsible, and in this he is like Criseyde. He is a good soldier, but again and again he shows a touch of fear as to what life will do for him. His soliloquy on predestination in Book IV is the perfect expression of his need to put the blame for failure on something outside himself. He shows a measure of what is nowadays called the will to fail-

ure, especially in his manner with Criseyde in the love-scene:

And in his mynde he gan the tyme acorse
That he com there, and that he was born

III, 1072-1073.

Such sentiments are only too familiar to the modern psychologist, who has a name for the emotion expressed herewith. And here we find the reason for his habitual trick of not putting his best foot forward; it is like his "surrogation" in taking emotional satisfaction through expressions of despair rather than through direct activity. In all this Diomedes is his complement, who wastes few words and little time.

Young people, I find, often ask why Criseyde was persuaded to leave Troy. They are not content with the answer that the matter was settled by the vote of Parliament, or that the heroine's timid nature led her to play safe on every occasion and therefore on this. And I think there is something in their question. Why did she go after all? If she was satisfied with Troilus, why didn't she use one of the many resources at her command to stay longer in Troy with her lover? She might have played sick, or she might have worked on the sympathies of Troilus and Pandarus to help her resist the mandate awhile. She was a clever woman, and she knew it; but it is she who persuades Troilus that it is better for her to go. I cannot help wondering whether in Troilus's lack of real stamina (to draw it mild), the lack of forthright masculinity, she was left a little unsatisfied, readier perhaps to move elsewhere. She made no move after her union with the stalwart Diomedes (her excuses, v, 694 ff., mean noth-

ing) — or before it — to use her resources to return to Troy or even to visit the city again.

I know we shall be told that all this is rank modernism, reading into Chaucer's poem ideas that the poet simply could not have imagined. The technique of Courtly Love, critics will say, explains all this. But they forget that the realistic genius of the poet would hardly accept a convention he could not vitalize; and here enters the problem of living human nature as it is now as well as it has been, with all the characteristics so plain to psychological study as well as with mysteries yet unsolved. But, someone may object, Aurelius in the *Franklin's Tale* keeps his love secret for a long time, is he another example of this type? Aurelius, we must remember, was in a different situation, for he was in love with another man's wife, while Criseyde was a widow. Furthermore he did speak to his lady as soon as he dared. Can we suppose that young lovers in the Middle Ages were really restrained by directions in some code of manners on the subject? Not if they had nerve. In any case, the examples of a dozen lovers who hid their devotion would not account for the fact that Troilus lets Pandarus accomplish almost everything for him. It is an extraordinary phenomenon that Chaucer must have faced. His solution of the problem was to show the hero as generally disinclined to dominate the situation, to accept full responsibility. And in harmony with this we find Troilus at the very start jeering at love and lovers. What is the significance of that in modern psychology? It shows him again personally insecure, personally unwilling to take the risk of a venture in love; and so by way of compensation he jeers at the whole business and thus pro-

fects his *amour propre*. But why should the young man have felt any insecurity in such matters — was he not fully alive and normal, as competent as any young Trojan? Into this question the poet was not compelled to enter, even if he had thought of it. His creation he made without the benefit of modern psychology, but with that intuitive understanding of life and human beings that marks him among the greatest. Troilus in his fears is a balance to Cressid and her timidity, they are both a foil to the rashly confident Pandarus, whose guidance brings them all to failure, and to the sanely confident Diomedes, who gets what he wants. Again the symmetry of the poem is made clear, and again we see its perfection of detail.

So when the stricken Troilus, alone in the temple, looks upon himself and curses his fate, we are not, I think, expected to weep with him. Least of all are we expected to be taught wisdom by his wild and whirling words —

“For if ther sitte a man yond on a see
Than by necessite bihoveth it
That, certes, thyn opynyoun sooth be,
That wenest or coniectest that he sit.
And further over now aycynward yit,
Lo, right so is it of the part contrarie .”

IV, 1023–1028.

“furthermore nevertheless notwithstanding however” — indeed how can anyone have ever thought so! For if Geoffrey Chaucer shows himself at all in his works, he shows himself a healthy spirit. And I hear his voice when Pandarus comes in upon the woeful Troilus and says. “I! who say evere a wis /man faren so?” (IV, 1087.)

But in stating all this I would not maintain that our hero is one-sided or somewhat pathological. His vitality shows itself when he takes out his rebelliousness in battling with the Greeks. His exultant heart produces not only poetry but song. His excellent naiveté appears in his grateful willingness to procure his sister for Pandarus. His burst of temper is wholly refreshing. It breaks as happily into the monotony of his despair at Cressid's going, as Griselda's momentary concern that Walter shall not "torment" the new bride interrupts her own continued "sadnesse" (stability). Says the angry Troilus:

"O oold, unholsom, and mislyved man,
 Calkas I mene, alas! what eileth the,
 To ben a Grek, syn thou art born Troian?
 O Calkas, which that wolt my bane be,
 In corsed tyme was thou born for me!
 As wolde blisful Jove, for his joie,
 That I the hadde, wher I wolde, in Troie!"

IV, 330-336.

He not only puts the blame on Calkas for his own misadventure, but according to his regular practise he explains Calkas and his sins by external circumstance. Another outburst shows his trick of turning on everybody except himself; Cassandra has interpreted his dream to his own disadvantage.

"Thow seyst nat soth," quod he, "thow sorceresse
 With al thy false goost of prophecy!
 Thow wenest ben a gret devyneresse!"

" V, 1520 ff

determinist. [There are other terms to cover the fact of some external influence in human life, and we need one which excludes the theory of any trace of free will. In this essay, then, I shall confine the use of "determinism" and allied expressions to such a meaning. I shall consider whether in this sense it has any applicability to the views expressed in Chaucer's *Troilus*, and what conclusions may be drawn regarding the poet's own ideas on the subject. First it will clarify the situation to look briefly into the discussion of the subject during the Middle Ages as a background to the poet's theory.

I

The importance of the question in literary history is not only intellectual but aesthetic. In literature artistic appeal varies in depicting, on the one hand, a character moved entirely by what amount to external forces (whether heritage, humors, or motives over which the individual has no control), and, on the other, a character morally responsible because, in part at least, free to choose his course. Without raising the issue of art for art's sake, we may note that in this sense the values of a work of art may include moral patterns as well as others, and that the emotional response may be changed by the fact that the onlooker cannot put aside the situation as in any way isolated, or as unrelated to his own action in the future. Reflection may be added to pity and terror if one has the conviction that one can affect one's own destiny in part, and that the future is something more than a question of mere luck. In comparison, an entirely fatalistic tragedy seems less rich in variety, and to many will appear

even warped as a picture of life. With such an art as that of fatalism there is nothing to do but weep. But whether the experience of moral tragedy is salutary or not, we may observe that it is different in important ways from that received at the spectacle of the action of irresponsible puppets.

The aesthetic importance of the distinction was clearly perceived by Aristotle, who, in discussing tragedy, at first points out that for hero an entirely virtuous man will not do, for his adversity will merely shock us. On the other hand, in what is really an inductive fashion, inferring his principles from the drama of his day, and trying to formulate them in relation to his philosophy, Aristotle traces the development of a tragedy to an essential weakness in the hero. This, it is true, need not be a moral weakness, but there can be little doubt that Aristotle deliberately chose the inclusive expression *ἀμαρτία* because he was giving special attention to his favorite tragedy, the *Oedipus Tyrannus*. For elsewhere in his works the necessity of moral responsibility and of moral value is never ignored, and he shows definitely his belief in an element of human free will. The gravity of the question, however, is reflected in the discussion among critics as to the precise meaning of *ἀμαρτία* and as to the real cause of the tragedy in the story of Oedipus. For the latter, Professor Abby Leach has maintained, with apparent justice, that even there a moral weakness furnishes the spring to the action: "Yet Sophocles plainly shows even in his case that his own traits of character brought on and augmented the catastrophe. Further, this play is but one. . . ." And of the characteristics of the Greeks the same writer remarks. "Freedom of thought, freedom of action, love of the beautiful, joy in

living, incessant activity . . . all these are diametrically opposed to any fatalistic doctrine, to anything bordering on patient and unquestioning submission to the fixed and unalterable decrees of fate." While the Greeks had a sense of destiny, they were able to sustain the paradox of fate and free will, so well recognized and discussed in the Middle Ages. The critic's enthusiasm shows the instinctive revolt almost anyone feels at any kind of moral slavery.

The fact that Aristotle puts the cause of real tragedy in a flaw, moral or otherwise, in the leading character, rather than in the crushing power of more purely external circumstance, suggests that his own preference was typically humanistic — that he held that character, rather than forces outside the individual, is destiny. By this we cannot mean that character is only another variety of destiny (inasmuch as character is partly a gift of nature), for it is an impressive fact that Aristotle does not put the prime cause in outer nature or in the plans of the gods. The whole point of the *ἀμαρτία* is not that it is the necessary hypothesis for destruction, but that it brings the one touch of human nature in which we may resemble the hero and apply his case to ours and ours to his. We may have tragedies where the whole action is concerned with the helpless destruction of a group of beings, where every cause is external, where no gesture or action springs from a vital spark of freedom, and thus where all the lines of artistic appeal form a beautiful harmony in their direction downward like a soft shower. The cross currents introduced by the interplay of free motivation will be lacking. But such tragedies will represent the sort of art left to us when the pseudo-scientist and certain psychological fad-

dists have done their worst with human nature, and they will really embody determinism. Such, however, is not the tragedy of the Greeks, where irony springs from the reality of the human will striving in conflict with and sometimes playing into the hands of fate. Even if one holds that the human will always succumbs in any conflict with fate, and thus produces a sentimental philosophy of pessimism, the result will be other than deterministic. On the other hand, to maintain that on certain occasions the will is of no avail, and that occasionally the innocent suffer, is a still different conception. Such, I believe, is the view of Sophocles.

The real difficulty in dealing with the problem of fatalism in art comes from the fact that the mind is likely to reject the paradox of fate and free will as a contradiction. When the element of fate in a plot is successfully demonstrated, one may rush to the conclusion that free will is excluded. But the Greeks retained some belief in both, and the Middle Ages, from St Augustine and Boethius on, kept the same tradition in their analysis of predestination or grace and their recurrent insistence on human freedom and moral responsibility. Yet the difficulty in keeping a balance between the ideas appears in the medieval debate and modern accounts of it. Thus St Thomas Aquinas follows the Aristotelian tradition of making the will subject, in a sense, to the intellect, so much so that Windelband, writing of the Occamist and Thomist controversy, speaks of St Thomas's view as that of "intellectualistic determinism." Now I suppose that to-day no one would seriously maintain that in the ordinary sense of the word Thomas Aquinas was really a determinist. The great Doctor certainly held that, where knowledge is clear,

choice will move immediately to what is best. But in actual fact knowledge is seldom so clear, and rarely is full freedom of that kind made our own (until the Truth makes us free). For the present argument it is sufficient to bear in mind that St Thomas allows choice between differing values, and one may further consult his argument that man does not choose of necessity, and read again his sections on the goodness of the will, on merit and demerit.

The solution of the problem lies partly in the fact that man may suffer worldly tragedy and yet, like Job, win spiritual victory. This to some will be as unsatisfactory as the spiritual reward seems unreal; and for a valid free will they may insist that the human will should have power to control material destiny, although that is another matter. Boethius resolves the difficulty by putting the whole question where it belongs — in eternity, where Divine foresight is unlimited, and parallel lines are at last to meet. It is thither, we recall, that after his debate on fate and free will the soul of Troilus takes its flight.

2

From the present discussion of the paradox it is obvious that in considering Chaucer's ideas of determinism, heaping up instances of his apparent fatalism is a futile task. The gods rule the story of Palamon and Arcite as they rule life in general; astronomical forces touch the life of Constance; and we know from the discussion of God's prescience in Boethius that any man's death is "shapen" ere his "sherte." But we lose enormously in appreciating Chaucer if we assume that because "it is one of the glories of Chaucer's tragic art that

he should have dignified his drama of human experiences by linking them up with those more mysterious and awe-inspiring forces of destiny which govern both men and the universe," he has therefore eliminated the meaning and artistic value of human free will. In the *Knight's Tale*, Chaucer has taken pains to draw on Boethius for his references to chance, and, as I have shown elsewhere, has gone out of his way *for some reason or other* to reproduce the Christian portrait of Fortune in Dante in his own account of Destiny — Destiny who carries out the "purveiaunce" of God, which, as any reader of Boethius knows, cannot and does not affect the power of human free will. Furthermore, when Arcite suffers, we remember that it was in defiance of his oath of brotherhood that he turned rival to Palamon, who after all (and it is another of Chaucer's alterations) was the first to see the lady. The gods themselves are indeed for a time doubtful about the issue. Whatever the degree of sentimentalism in the story told by Boccaccio, Chaucer has gone to the trouble of restoring "poetic justice," and, though a sense of proportion would keep one from pressing too hard the element of moral responsibility in a story of this kind, if this is a case of determinism then it is the most flexible and gentle determinism known to man.

It is a ponderous business to analyze these tales for moral implications, but it is only by so doing that we can get a hint of the author's point of view. The same difficulty rises in discussing the *Troilus*, which is a poem of youth written with incomparable lightness and charm. In dealing with it, however, we are bound to observe that, whatever the poet's joy in the telling, he has not taken the composition lightly;

and a point of cardinal importance for penetrating to his own ideas is the necessity of comparing the poem with its sources for evidence of the nature of the changes introduced. One might have supposed that this was somewhat axiomatic in the field of scholarship to-day. The important elements in these changes (in comparison with the *Filostrato*), often noted before, are chiefly directed toward a deep intensification of the values which Chaucer found in his original. This is true, whether it is a question of the subtlety of Criseyde and her candor with herself, or the physical details of the love-affair. Pandarus is set more in contrast to Troilus because he is older, and achieves a special individuality thereby; and his function thus becomes the clearer, and in more perfect harmony with his vicarious satisfaction in the success of Troilus, and with his futility when Criseyde is faithless. Diomedes as well is more Diomedes than ever, when (as in Benoit) he makes love to Criseyde at once on her return instead of later. And finally the element of fate is dignified by additions from Boethius on the philosophical side, and deepened by astrological material. These additions might lead one to regard the poem as a study of a particular case of the slings and arrows of outrageous Fortune.

But one must not overdo the matter. While character, love, and the "influences of these hevenes hye," and fate itself in various ways, affect the actions of the characters in the poem, we can hardly have a right to put all these elements together, as merely separate aspects of destiny, to show the total effect of destiny on the reader or hearer. Some theorists, it is true, did analyze fate or fortune into such separate manifestations, but we cannot assume that the aver-

age reader could be relied upon to perform the reverse process, to achieve the synthesis of all these various things, and thus to read into the poem an overwhelming power of fate which would make unreal a single stirring of merely human impulse. Few readers, I think, would see in Troilus's impulse to love the same force as that which ruled the doom of Troy. Moreover, the great majority of Chaucer's references to Fortune or Fate are based on similar passages in the *Filostrato*, and there the same fatal scheme is in process. But even if Chaucer wanted to pile Ossa upon Pelion in his attempt to increase the brooding sense of fate, yet, as we have seen, mediævally he may not have had the slightest intention of excluding human free will. Most of his additions on the subject are taken from the argument of Boethius, and yet the conclusion of that argument in what is almost his "favorite book" is a defense of free will. What more could fate do against Boethius, and yet what else do we learn in the *Consolatio* but the power of man in spite of odds? There is no more in the *Troilus* on the subject of destiny, astrology, or the grace of God than in the *Divine Comedy*, and yet Dante's poem is chiefly occupied with the expectations of moral responsibility.

¶ But we do not have to concede so much as all that. At least three times Chaucer has taken pains to show his own point of view by departing from his source in passages carefully made to reveal what he thought. These resemble in some respects the corresponding passages in the *Knight's Tale* and his full discussion in the *Balade* on Fortune. If ever a writer expressed clearly and emphatically what he thought in such a case, Chaucer most certainly did. In the famous

soliloquy of Troilus in Book IV, the hero gives, it is true, considerable expression to what, for the sake of the argument, we may call determinism — although I think he is rather complaining against predestination and trying to exonerate himself without impiety. In any case, there is no reason to suppose that this monologue is spoken for other than dramatic effect. It shows the youth in a typical mood, giving way to his feelings rather than to his intellect, with all the solemnity of his despair in a situation on which the poem as a whole sheds ironic light. In the three passages referred to, however, Chaucer deliberately modifies the philosophy of the story he found in Boccaccio, giving definite expression to a Christian point of view — in two, adopting from Boethius and Dante the description of a Christian *Fortuna* (iii, 617 ff. and v, 1541 ff), which removes the element of caprice from destiny, and restores the control to a rational rather than an arbitrary God, and in the third, the *Epilogue*, expressly interpreting the whole plot on Christian terms. It was unnecessary to call on Boethius and Dante for the idea of Fortune as subservient to God, if the story was simply one of disaster and fatalism, the two passages are in harmony with the third, which they precede and interpret. Moreover the two passages occur at the crises of the plot, and with the third at the end bind the philosophical construction of the plot together. Thus, for anyone who reads the story as Chaucer wrote it, there is no break between the early part where Troilus gives himself up a willing victim to the Court of Love, and the end where he sees that in his tragedy were the elements of folly and learns that he has suffered from the consequences of his own choice. Of the *Epilogue* Professor

Root has finely said: "Yet it is no mere tacked-on moral. It is implicit in the whole poem. . . . Chaucer is not so much pointing a moral, as giving us at the end his own verdict as to the permanent values of those aspects of our human life which are for the moment of such passionate importance."

Here is the mainspring of the tragedy, and here is the answer to Troilus's own soliloquy and modern assumptions of determinism in the poem. To take the words of Professor Curry: ". . . the man who does not exercise his free-will in the control and direction of his emotions, finds himself presently without free-choice in the guidance of his actions when the power of the stars descends upon him or when he comes in contact with the destinal force inherent in other people's influence." That is well put, except that we must note that the point of choice for the man comes when he "does not exercise his free-will." One would suppose, however, that the three important additions to the poem were sufficiently clear indications of Chaucer's own ideas, written with the greatest care, darting here for a word and there for a phrase, and finally putting the whole matter as forcibly and beautifully as ever the conclusion of a poem could. If we leave out passages like these because they conflict with our theories, we may read the *Consolation of Philosophy* as a fine study of settled determinism, and the *Divine Comedy* as a superb pagan tragedy.

3

Let us waive all previous argument, however, and try to imagine that the *Troilus* was meant to embody determinism. What then would be its meaning? In the first place, much of

the criticism of the poem written so far must be discarded as worthless. Thus when Mr Kittredge observes of Criseyde, "She soon discovers that she has matched her woman's wit, not against her dotard father merely, but against the doom of Troy," we realize that she has done nothing of the kind. Nature-as-Destiny has given her the woman's wit, and the stars have given her the impulse to match it against the doom of Troy. Hers is a case of Fate against Fate, nothing less and nothing more. When Mr. Curry remarks of Troilus, "He fights at first against the destinal powers that would give him Criseyde for a season; he struggles against the forces which would finally take her away from him" — (an acute piece of criticism which reveals once more the element of symmetry in the poem), we object, Not so! Nature-as-Destiny has given him the character which under the influence of the stars here conflicts with other destinal powers. I shall not go on listing instances where critical insight is based on the assumption that Chaucer's characters have free will, but the evidence is sufficiently abundant, and on any other terms, of course, the characters represent nothing more than fate fighting with itself.

Must we give up the full meaning of Criseyde's character, that of a clear-headed young woman who looks the facts calmly in the face until she learns the necessity of self-deceit? Shall we say that her paradox is only that produced by destiny, and that her candor is only an entirely meaningless reverie in which a human being is under the illusion that she is deciding her future course of action (whereas she is passive and impotent, while forces work and stimuli produce their quota of reaction)? No blame attaches to anybody in this

scheme, not even to Calchas, time-server that he is, but fortunate indeed on this plan; for all are moved simply by the wind, the weather, and the rain. And if modern criticism has generally proceeded on a false basis, allowing some degree of responsibility to the characters, Geoffrey Chaucer has been just as guilty, and at least part of the time has been under the same illusion; for in the *Legend of Good Women* he refers with apparent sincerity to the sin of Criseyde, and even in the *Troilus* acknowledges her "gilt," when it would have been a matter of the greatest simplicity, in the very passage in which he writes her defense, to say that she was really the victim of circumstance. He would, he says, excuse her for very pity. Why then, at this point, does he fail even so much as to mention fate and stars? But it is clear that we have no right to trust Chaucer's honesty, if he is really a determinist, for in the Epilogue he speaks of the pagans' cursed ancient ways and lauds Christian ethic (although on this basis we know from the passion in the earlier lines that he secretly prefers the warm sensuality of the story which contradicts it). The Epilogue, in fact, he added only as a sop to the pious, and then (as we are fairly certain that he inserted the soliloquy of Troilus still later) he went back to deepen the pagan element (which, according to some critics, was really opposed to his own philosophy). Surely this is a new Chaucer, and one that we have never met hitherto.

Is this really the upshot of the story? If so, why not leave the matter at the meagre summary given in the opening lines of the poem? The author's purpose is merely to tell of Troilus

°

In lovyng, how his aventures fellen
Fro wo to wele, and after out of joie .

1, 3-4


Do we conceive of Chaucer writing the long and admittedly beautiful Epilogue to keep the orthodox undisturbed, and then returning to the poem to intensify elements out of harmony with it? Is most of the criticism up to date based on illusions in the critics no less than on those in the characters, especially when that criticism finds a richer meaning in the poem from the very fact of its implications of free will? All this is no exaggeration of our problem. If anyone uses determinism to imply merely an emphasis on the occasional futility (and not the unreality) of human will power in gaining material ends, then let us have that clearly stated, but such a view is in accordance with orthodox medieval philosophy (as the whole tradition of Fortune and Fate shows), and even that interpretation is not wholly fair to the action of the piece. Chaucer, and for some centuries his readers as well, have been concerned with the degree of blame to attach to Criseyde, who is often cited as guilty of the cardinal sin of faithlessness. It is absurd to compare the poem with tragedies like *Macbeth* and *Othello* and *Lear*, but in all these cases the touch of human frailty explains what follows, and greater consequences follow the "dram of eale" than the characters can foresee.

But the *Troilus* is not to be taken on such a scale. It is a poem of youth. Its high seriousness is in part that of youth, and its suffering really ends with Troilus's grief over losing Criseyde. The death of the hero, as Chaucer makes quite clear, is not an immediate part of the tragic sequence. It is

caused in an affair entirely outside of his connection with the story of Criseyde (v, 1763-1764, and 1806. Cf. *Philos.* viii, st. 26-27). His death must come sometime and it comes in this way to release his spirit for the flight that permits him to scan his own career and see its meaning. His flight to a Christian heaven is no stranger than the original flight of Scipio Africanus or the later one of Pompey the Great to what is substantially the same heaven. Dante shows us the Trojan Ripheus in Paradise, and we understand the point. Again Chaucer took great pains in composing the passage, and in this celestial region we as critics, like Troilus, may learn a sense of proportion. Among other things we may learn to understand that the sin of Troilus was not grave or mortal, nor his tragedy of stupendous and lasting significance (we do not observe that, as a sop to the pious, Troilus was plunged into hell), and that the apparatus of the Court of Love is mere tinkling symbolism as the strife of the critics is often sounding brass. The Epilogue no more contradicts the mood of the poem than various tendencies of human nature in one person contradict one another, on any other terms every Christian would have to be a complete ascetic and every Catholic a puritan. It is an aspect of Chaucer's greatness and his breadth that he can enter as heartily into the love affair as into the vision of the limitation of earthly things and the supreme value of lasting idealism.

4

Surely it is a safe principle in criticizing a great work of art to assume that the interpretation in harmony with all parts of the poem is the one nearest to the intention of the author.

Another good principle to assume is that a great artist knows what he is about, and that he has a right to be understood on his own terms. In all fairness, in the interpretation of the *Troilus*, how can we reject the Epilogue and deny any Christian meaning in the passages on Fortune? Can we throw overboard all criticism up to now because of a recrudescence psychological fad? Shall we hold that Chaucer intended one meaning for the Christians of his day and another, assuming that they were a different group, for those who liked a kind of pagan tragedy, the very existence of which is doubtful in that period? And, finally, can we assume that, for the sake of the thrill, the poet used an alien philosophy to get his effects? 

[This last point is one that deserves a moment's special attention. Has Chaucer used determinism for artistic purposes in the body of the poem, and then added the Epilogue as a later *confessio fidei* to set the public at rest about himself? This is a wholly different matter from Milton's using a geocentric system of astronomy for *Paradise Lost*, or from Wordsworth's calling on Platonism for the poetic truth of the *Ode on Intimations of Immortality*. Determinism implies a special attitude toward life as a whole. It is, I believe, an unworthy conception of the nature of art to hold that a writer may adopt for the nonce whatever philosophy has artistic value and play it for its effect as if it meant nothing in particular. Before we commit ourselves to such a theory we must see important examples of the trick furnished by great writers, examples generally accepted as such by competent critics. A recent attempt to demonstrate that such is the case with Shakespeare is a palpable failure. To play with philosophy for

the sake of a sensation is hardly characteristic of any poet who sees art as a source of something more than ordinary pleasure.

If we accept Chaucer's terms the poem is in harmony with his philosophy. Troilus on earth may expound determinism with all the determination of his desperate nature; but from the heights of heaven, looking back with more humor, he abandons the idea and admits his folly. There are thus two layers of meaning in the poem, symmetrically adjusted, as we have seen, to each other: Troilus was guilty of sinning against the Court of Love, and was punished by Criseyde's infidelity; from the Christian point of view, he was guilty of yielding to blind pleasure, and he suffered. Doubly therefore he was responsible for what occurred. The dedication to Gower and Strode, which causes difficulty for those who take another view, is thus explained as delightfully appropriate. The poet, not too gravely and not without impudence, agrees with these gentlemen for at least once. It has been remarked earlier in this study that the poem may seem almost like the presentation of a particular case of the workings of chance, with the *Consolation of Philosophy* as a background. The caprice of Fortune exalts and lowers the unhappy Troilus; the question of free will is raised, and the process is roughly similar to that of the *Consolatio* up to the solution. Here again we may observe that the solution in the poem is precisely that furnished by Boethius, who also bids men to lift their eyes to the contemplation or eternal values; Troilus in fact proceeds to eternity where all these difficulties are made plain. The conclusion of Boethius, although suggesting no verbal influence, represents in sum the moral of the Epilogue:

" . and God, byholdere and forwytere of alle thingis, duelleth above, and the present eternite of his sighte renneth alwey with the diverse qualite of our dedes, dispensynge and ordeynynge medes to gode men and tormentz to wikkide men Ne in ydel ne in veyn ne ben ther put in God hope and preyeris, that ne mowen nat ben unspedful ne withouten effect whan they been ryghtful

"Withstond thanne and eschue thou vices, worschupe and love thou vertues, areise thu corage to ryghtful hopes, yilde thou humble preieres an heygh Gret necessite of prowesse and vertu is encharged and com-aunded to yow, yif ye nil nat dissimulen, syn that ye worken and don . byform the eyen of the Iuge that seeth and demeth alle thinges "

V, pr vi, 328 ff

The spirit of the *Consolatio* is in the *Troilus*, its hymns are taken over in various parts of the poem, its philosophy quoted here and there, and the final moral is the same. To urge that in the *Troilus* the feeling of the sections regarding love and passion is really pagan, and therefore totally opposed to the mood of the Epilogue, is like objecting to the sympathetic presentation of the grief of Boethius in the *Consolatio* when the moral enlightenment bestowed by Philosophy is later to follow. In the Epilogue the influence of Boethius on Chaucer's own conception of life in its more important aspects is finally complete.

Elsewhere Chaucer again studies the problem of fate. Chauntecleer in the *Nun's Priest's Tale* is fearful of what destiny has in store for him, his wife causes him much trouble, and his tragedy is linked with that of Troy and Rome as well (B. 4545 ff.). One might take the following lines as indicative of Chaucer's settled determinism:

O destinee, that mayst nat been eschewed!
Alas, that Chauntecleer fleigh fro the bemes!

Allas, his wyf ne roghte nat of dremes!
And on a Friday fil al this meschaunce.

B 4528 ff

But the fates seem to be in conflict once more, Fortune steps in to help the hero, and apparently if a man keeps his eyes open he can take advantage of celestial indecision.

"For he that wynketh, whan he sholde see,
Al wilfully, God lat him nevere thee! "

B 4621-4622.

Haec fabula docet. Chaucer's head was where it should be, and he did not cultivate a sentimental art at the expense of common sense.

Chapter V

THE LEGEND OF GOOD WOMEN

WHAT can be said for the *Legend of Good Women*? Despite the grace and freshness of the Prologue, which may be enjoyed in either of its two forms although B is more spontaneous and A is better ordered, the work as a whole is usually found dull. The somber note of the martyrdom of the fair ladies is one that admits of little variation. The poem should be studied, I believe, against the background of the whole controversy about women which came to the surface from time to time in the Middle Ages and greatly occupied the attention of some important writers, among whom was certainly Chaucer. He had translated at least part of the *Roman de la Rose*, a poem that was really notorious for Jean de Meun's unflattering portrayal of feminine temperament; in the *Troilus* he had described a heroine who was guilty, however charmingly, of the worst of sins. If, as Lydgate tells us, the *Legend* was written at the request of the queen, and if it shows signs of being an ingenious response to an invitation of this kind, nevertheless Chaucer did not stop there with his discussion of the woman question. The topic comes up again in a far more significant way. It is the seed that flowers in the most magnificent creation he ever achieved: the character of the Wife of Bath and the drama of the Marriage Cycle.

It is not surprising in any age to find that the problem of

woman is what chiefly occupies a poet's imagination. In the Middle Ages this was sure to be the case in many instances because — whether poets usually hymn of love or not — the social status of the fair sex was a matter of argument on every side. The heritage of dignity ascribed to women by the culture that preceded medievalism was not impressive. According to Islam the female has no soul until she marries. The Roman lady certainly won more respect than that; but Tacitus seems prompted to castigate conditions among his own people when he presents a very favorable view of the way the Germans regarded their women. According to him the Germans thought of them as prophetesses, even as divine. Doubtless the goddesses, in the Germanic as also in the Celtic mythology, reflected the reverence for the inescapably noble attributes of women of which men could hardly be unaware. But one has only to read Bede's account of St Hilda to see what an advance is made with the coming of Christianity to the western world. Judaism had known of the prudent woman whose industry lends honor to her family, and whose children learn to call her blessed (*Prov.* xxxi); but this is a whole world different from the revelation that came with the Virgin Mary. Where once a place in the ancient temple had been set apart for women, that men might not be contaminated, now the great gift of the Incarnation was through a woman, worthy beyond all other creatures. Such a fact could not fail to modify the European attitude toward daughters, sisters, and wives as well as mothers.

The cult of the Virgin was not, as many seem to suppose, an invention of the twelfth or perhaps even the thirteenth

century. She was called the "Mother of God" at least as early as the Council of Ephesus (431); by the seventh century a string of churches across Europe were dedicated to her and named in her honor. She appears depicted in the Catacombs as early as the second century, and by the sixth she appears in mosaics. Her assumption is shown in an eighth-century linen at Sens, and in a ninth- or tenth-century ivory at St Gall. The *Ave* was recited in Old English. In addition to these few facts many more might be cited to show the veneration offered to her throughout the Middle Ages beginning with the earliest years; and the point is that men could not have fallen on their knees to invoke her prayers, or those of any other of the women saints, without an appreciable effect on their attitude toward women in general. The teaching of St Paul that wives should be subject to their husbands, the preaching of the monks that the weakness of Eve still threatened mankind, could not modify the view that women have after all a celestial importance.

On the worldly side too in the literature of love the idea grew that women could inspire and exalt men to a vision of nobler living. Ironically enough someone has suggested that this theory may have developed from Moslem sources, but it reached Christian writers and filled the poems of the troubadours and the authors of the *dolce styl nuovo* until it found supreme expression in Dante's *Divine Comedy*. When centuries later Goethe speaks of the eternal feminine leading us upward and onward, he says what would have been inconceivable before the Middle Ages. Whether the poetry of this school gave its phrases to the literature of devotion to Our Lady, or whether (as is doubtful) the influence went

the other way, does not much matter, the religious devotion combined with the secular to raise a proper respect for women. And this fact is obvious in the great controversy on the subject that flourished for centuries in the latter part of the period. For not every one was pleased when a pedestal was first offered to woman, whether saint or feudal mistress. Treatises were written, poems composed, invectives and diatribes launched, to the effect that women were frail and fickle. Of these the most noteworthy was Jean de Meun's part of the *Roman de la Rose*, which borrowed its disillusion from realistic passages in Ovid, and described woman as hypocritical, vain, dishonest, and scheming. A lady, says Jean through the words of the Duenna, cannot keep to one suitor. She must have several. I use the translation, with some changes, of Mr. F. S. Ellis:

And so a damsel fair ywis
When mistress of the field she is,
And may at will her suitors please,
Good right hath she their gold to seize, —
Nay, she would be a fool indeed
Who failed her interest to speed
Through giving all her love to one.

Only recall, says he, the sad cases of Dido, Phyllis, Oenone, Medea, and the rest, who suffered from being constant to one man. Furthermore, a lady must see to it that by the use of paint and powder she is as beautiful as she can be.

Women should learn to cry with grace,
But they so oft find time and place
For tears, I need not teach them how
To weep — they knew that well, I vow.

For every woman in her eye
Stores tears, and one and all can cry
At will . . .

He goes on to set forth the tricks of these artful creatures.
The lady's costume must be suited to her loveliness, and she
must know how to manage it:

Or as she knows right well to do,
She just uplifts her gown a few
Short inches, quicker pace to suit,
Disclosing thus her winsome foot,
With hope that all the passers by
Its dainty form and turn may spy.

In making love she must be artful.

As he more vehement doth grow
More hesitation should she show.

At last when yielding she must protest:

I yield to you for love alone,
Through presents you had never won
My virgin heart . . .
Ah! wicked man, who knew the style
That would my maiden's soul beguile.

When she has him, she must rob the poor man of every-
thing he has:

The more that women make men pay,
The more, far more, beloved are they.
.
To fleece a gull may many aid
Her valets and her chambermaid,
Her sister, nurse, and many another,
And e'en with equal zest, her mother. . . .

And finally, after taking from the wretch all he owns, the lady must throw him over by pretending to be enraged at some unknown perfidy of his. So ends the fine story. Jean de Meun adds the observation that, though women are enslaved by law, Nature has made them achieve freedom. Birds in a cage flutter against the bars:

And every woman doth possess
Within her that same restlessness.

Except in Criseyde's speech of surrender, Chaucer's heroine in the *Troilus* is nothing like the creature here displayed. We see here instead something more like a picture of the Wife of Bath in her youth. But I anticipate. People learned passages from the *Roman de la Rose* by heart just as to-day they know lines from *Hamlet* or *The Merchant of Venice*. Everyone knew the poem. And to-day one can drive to the little town of Meung-sur-Loire where Jean lived, and see a statue put up in his honor. It displays a lovely lady offering him a rose. It must have been carved by someone who hadn't read his poem. Certainly no woman who had read it would have offered him a tribute of this kind.

In the early part of the fourteenth century Guillaume de Guileville wrote his three huge allegories about the pilgrimage of man in the heavens above as well as in the earth beneath, in size out-topping Bunyan's work and almost Dante's. Here in a long passage Guillaume attempted to rebuke Jean de Meun, and implied that his doctrines were an assault on the principle of chastity. John Lydgate, monk of Bury St Edmunds, translated the allegory which contained these lines. In France another attack on women was launched in the *Lamentationes Matheoli*, 'written in the thirteenth cen-

tury and translated into French in the fourteenth. Related material was incorporated in the treatise of the "Goodman of Paris," who wrote to prepare his wife, much younger than he, for her probable second adventure into matrimony. And at about the same time there was living in Paris the lovely Christine de Pisan, who was a militant feminist if ever there was one. In 1399 she wrote her *Epistre au Dieu d'Amours*, in which Cupid comes to woman's aid and attacks Jean de Meun's *Roman*:

How long the tale! what tangles have we here!
Mixture of science gloomy, dark, and drear,
Adventures too and wiles of every kind
Just to deceive a simple maiden's mind. . . .

A fairly just estimate I should say! Cupid recalls the great instances of faithful and distinguished ladies, and even exonerates poor Eve of having deceived Adam. Christine's poem was translated into fifteenth-century English by Thomas Hoccleve, who was moved again to write in women's behalf, explaining, among other things, that although originally woman was made from a rib she is not therefore crooked: the rib is circular and a circle is the perfect figure in geometry. A number of other works in English on the great problem of woman's estate might be cited. But in France Christine stirred up a tempest. The details are well known. Before she got through, she involved in her controversy the Prévost of the city of Lille, the secretary of Charles VI, the chancellor of the University of Paris (the great Gerson), and even the Queen of France herself. Unmoved by all this Christine went serenely on, disposing of Jean de Meun and her enemies too, proposing an educational

program for women, and inviting them to intelligence and also to a proper humility. She does not ask them to compete with man or to deprive him of his position of honor in the world.

At the end then of a great debate lasting about two hundred years the rights of woman were vindicated, if gently, and Christine managed her part of the warfare with dignity and charm. We may see her to-day in a manuscript illumination. Her face looks sensitive and rather elfish. As she writes she appears to be amused by the close attention of the little white dog at her feet. All in all she was a most interesting lady, and comes out of the battle with rather better grace, I think, than the eighteenth-century Mary Wollstonecraft, who wrote on the independence of woman but pursued a man across Europe. The business of getting a fair recognition for women has been a long and tedious process. Let us remember how much the Middle Ages contributed to all this. It is part of the history of Christianity, an influence of the cult of the Virgin Mary, a development springing from poetry and the troubadours and medieval allegory, and notably the result in part of the efforts of a delightful lady in France named Christine de Pisan.

Against all this background how does Chaucer's contribution appear? In general it shows him in his usual attitude on questions of reform. He does not seem to care much, at least on the surface. He is not lecturing anybody as a rule, and the temper of his verse is totally different from that of the *Vision of Piers Plowman* or even from that of "moral Gower." Presumably Queen Anne asked him to do penance for his heresy against love in his translation of the *Roman de la Rose*

and in the *Troilus*. Perhaps she even dictated the nature of the exercise he was to write. In any case he responded with the *Legend*, which in tracery and style is more like a valentine in certain respects than the more heavily weighted *Parliament of Fowls*. It certainly is not a serious or even a half-serious defence of woman, such as Christine might have chosen to write. It reveals in fact a delicately comic element which I think has been missed by those readers who have enjoyed its frail charm. Of course the humor of transferring religious conventions to the poetry of love has been long understood, the idea of Cupid's saints, parallel to the saints of the Church, continues the sort of appeal to mild mirth familiar in many instances elsewhere. Medieval people knew all about the commandments of love, the lover's confessional, the liturgy of the worship of Venus, so that such devices were worn a little pale by Chaucer's day.

But with all due allowance for the point that the *Legend* has to do with matters of love and fidelity, the fact that Cleopatra leads off the list — "Cleopatre with al thy passioun" — is, I still think, impressive. At the very least it accents the difference in the setting as a collection of love's legends, and thus the poet has intensified the value of this form of transfer of conventions. The result is something close to impudence. So too is the parallel, recently noted by a sharp critic, of the Queen of Love to the Virgin Mary and of the God of Love to the person of Christ. And I also think that the passage at the beginning about the need of authority where experience is lacking shows a similar echo of the ecclesiastical. The implication here follows that faithful woman are not often found in real life. To read such mean-

ing into the context has been called absurd, on the ground that such an insinuation would be cowardly; but that objection is valid only if we exaggerate the import of the discussion. At worst it is only an appeal for proof of good women (according to the standards of Courtly Love) in real life; it is in the mood of banter, and is in no worse taste than countless jokes exchanged in the world's history on the theme of woman's frailty. As for the Queen the poem seems to imply that she is in part at least, in a kind of hovering allusiveness, symbolized in Alceste, whose virtues reflect hers and who among faithful wives takes leading place.

Since this interpretation may be disputed, I may pause for a moment to follow Chaucer's procedure more in detail. The poem refers at the very start to the thousand times he has heard of the joy of heaven and the pain of hell, and then goes on at length to discuss the fact that nevertheless one has to take all this on authority. So one turns to books, he says, for authority in regard to doctrine, and to get stories of holiness, of hate, and so on.

Wel ought us thanne honouren and beleve
 These bokes, there we han noon other preve
F 27-28

The idea is retained in G. 27-28, rendered more precise by revision:

Wel oughte us thanne on olde bokes leve,
 Ther as there is non other assay by preve

Now an experienced poet, certainly a genius, does not begin an extensive work like the *Legend* without some design, the opening passage of his composition will hardly be a matter of

chance. Of course all this introduction is part of the quasi-ecclesiastical tone of the poem, and in that guise, does very well. But what is it that we are asked to take on authority in this emphatic manner? He continues with his discussion to say that he himself delights to read books and gives them his faith and credence. Then he narrates his own adventure of going to see the daisy (and in F. tells of the honor he pays to his lady). In the revised form of the Prologue (G), changing the original a little, he wrote:

But wherfore that I spak, to yeve credence
To bokes olde and don hem reverence,
Is for men shulde autoritees beleve,
There as ther lyth non other assay by preve
For myn entente is, or I fro yow fare,
The naked text in English to declare
Of many a story, or elles of many a geste,
As autours seyn, levethe hem if yow leste!

G. 81-88.

Then he sees (in a dream in both versions) the procession of the God of Love, who reproaches him for telling so many stories against women. Could he not find in his memory or in his books (according to G.) some story of women that were good and true? The books he has — Valerye, Titus, and the rest — have they nothing in them about clean maidens, true wives, steadfast widows, and especially about "trouthe" and the woe they endure for fidelity? Later Love says (in G. 528) that the poet knows the goodness of women by "pref" as well as "by storyes herebyform," and he points the remark with immediate reference to Alceste. This I suppose to be a tactful compliment to the Queen. He never lets the

problem of authorities quite drop from his attention. Plainly the implication is that Chaucer is to search books for evidence about faithful and good women.

A lady listening to such a discourse would be prompted to ask at once why the poet did not look for some examples among his acquaintances. Surely the Prologue is tactless, she would insist. If the beginning means anything, it implies that in default of instances in real life the author must turn to authorities. The suggestion, however slight, is there, quite definitely put in the initial reference to the unknowable facts about Heaven and Hell which he takes on faith. Later of Cleopatra he says the tale is "storyal soth, it is no fable" (702). Thisbe at her death exclaims may God forbid a woman cannot be as true in loving as a man! And as the stories proceed the poet apparently finds in his books the moral that while women are faithful, men may not be trusted (1254 ff.; 2387).

Be war, ye wemen, of youre subtyl fo,
Syn yit this day men may ensauple se,
And trusteth, as in love, no man but me
2559-2561

So the authorities justify women for the most part, and there are examples in real life if one look for them. But does such a conclusion stultify the original insinuation? Is it cowardly of the poet to propose an accusation in which he really does not believe? Such inferences demand a logic which the tone of the discourse does not in the least suggest, and lay an impossible burden on the lightness of touch which the poet clearly means to sustain. In a sense the logic is not violated anyhow: the poet, it would seem, is under the charge of be-

ing skeptical regarding the faithfulness of women and has to turn to the authorities, in the passage recently quoted the "ensample" to be seen in life is the faithless man, but that does not in itself prove the fidelity of his *amie*.

But I pause for a moment of wonder why none of the plots in the great stories, like those of Dido and Cleopatra, sufficiently set Chaucer's imagination going to win for us a more significant work of art. Here in the sufferings of these ladies was potential drama. Where is the dialogue, where are the touch and go, of sparkling realism and sense of human interplay, where is the genuine note of tragedy however lightly sounded like that which the poet had given to the world in his *Troilus*? Here in the *Legend* what he chiefly cares for is "routhe," and that, it seems, as a matter of duty. Perhaps he felt that in dealing with these martyred heroines, humor was not fitting; that humor somehow cancels pity. Yet such is not his customary manner, even in other equally delicate situations like that in the *Book of the Duchess*. Now and then, to be sure, we do perceive his smile, as when of Pyramus he writes:

Upon that o syde of the wal stod he,
And on that other side stod Thesbe.

750-751.

But in general his solemnity is like that which appears in the *Man of Law's Tale* and the *Physician's Tale*; in fact it has been suggested that these stories were once meant for the *Legend*, although manifestly in theme they do not follow the problem of fidelity. Perhaps it was because virtuous women in distress did not seem to *han* especially funny. I shall

have something to say again about his treatment of pity, but here I must admit, I cannot think that these narratives are thin simply because his emotions were taken up with the afflicted virtue of Cleopatra or Dido. He may have thought that his audience must be stirred; but why, we wonder, did his imagination fail to leap to his task when he began to write of such a scene as that where Aeneas leaves Dido? Even if like Trollope he wrote his stint every day, why did such an opportunity fail to quicken his thought and enrich the ink of his pen?

I am led to reflect on the sort of plots where Chaucer's creative powers were actually fired and where his production wants no trace of vitality. The *Troilus*, of course, shows full power, but there he had the *Filostrato* already passionately alive to stir him, and it is certain that its inspiration lasted beyond the composition of his own poem. The *Prioresse's Tale*, yes, the poignancy of childhood moved him as it did in the address of Constance to her child; but pathos alone did not get him very far in the *Monk's Tale* or in the story of St Cecilia. Pathos is not the only moving factor in the story of Griselda, and here the poet added lines showing a touch of rebelliousness in the heroine, and he later gave the tale a setting that threw a humorous light on certain features. Pathos can hardly be said to evoke his fullest artistic response, only compare how richly it inspired Dickens. Some of Chaucer's pathetic narratives were perhaps written by request, but they are not his best work. Humor and irony draw his interest without doubt, as one can see in the *Tale of Sir Thopas* and in the swift effectiveness of the story of the rioters. But the Prologue of the *Wife of Bath's Tale*, with all

its implications and echoes in the Marriage Cycle, is where the poet most surely reveals that his powers were functioning at their wealthiest, and here he began (as in fact with the *Troilus*) by dealing with his material in terms — not merely of humor or plot but — of character. The same is true of the Canterbury pilgrimage. The Wife of Bath came into being, I suppose, when he was reading about traits of female character in Deschamps's *Miroir de Mariage*, or possibly when he was contemplating some lurid women he had known, rich in human traits. So too with the other pilgrims; the abundance of his genius finds expression in terms of character, and, however much humor and pathos come into play, fundamentally it is human character that starts him at his best. He may begin his narrative with other things, as in the *House of Fame* or the *Parliament*, but sooner or later he gravitates toward character and its concerns. The reason then, I think, that Chaucer did not make much of the story of Cleopatra or Phyllis and the rest is that he began, not with character, but with a proposition.

I am afraid it was beginning with the moral that injured the *Legend*. M. Cazamian thinks the poem was left unfinished because "its subject and a humorous disposition agree too ill together." But the full humorous purpose the poet must have pretty well forgotten after composing the Prologue. No, it was the moral that lent thinness to the stories, and finally destroyed the whole plan. It was too simple, like virtue unalloyed, useful perhaps in allegories but less stimulating to the imagination of an artist. Whether Chaucer liked the moral, however, has little to do with the case; the point is that he thought of his plots with reference to that rather

than to the creatures he was presenting. Characterization, however good, is not brought to the fore in the sources he used. he relied on the *Roman d'Enéas* rather more than the *Aeneid*, and on Ovid and the *Ovide Moralizé*. He was led to think of the plot first and how that illustrated his theme. If he had begun to write of the Canterbury pilgrims with strict reference to sins and virtues, I believe he would have collapsed along the way. Even in a fable like the *Nun's Priest's Tale* what he cares about is Chantecler and Pertelote, one suspects he thought of them at times entirely without considering the moral, and the marvelous dialogue on dreams has little justification in the lesson at the end. All this is only what has happened before. Like a good writer in any age he did his best when he began with character and worked out his plot accordingly, but beyond most writers the thought of character filled and fructified his imagination to an extraordinary degree. It is certain that he loved people. That in the *Legend* he was a little irked by the business of having a set moral may appear in the slightly flippant treatment in the Prologue of the theme of faithful wives.

On the other hand, one of the good things in the *Legend* is the poet's little joke about his being an enemy to love. I wonder who originated that. Perhaps a lady at Court — I will not suggest the Queen herself, perhaps it was only the poet, bent on getting some idea for the poem which must be written. The idea that he had poor success in such matters he had presented before. Here one thinks of the Queen setting his task for him, and we can imagine how he took it. Another Queen enjoined upon Shakespeare the task of showing Falstaff in love. Here again a compliment of a sort was

attempted: the invincible hero who defeated Dame Quickly was for once to find his match, to be discomfited and, of all things, by the ladies. But it would not work. Here again the poet began with a proposition instead of with the character he already knew; the upshot is that the new hero is not Falstaff, and the play is not on the level of the Falstaff scenes in *Henry the Fourth*.

Yet there may be just a hard grain of truth in the accusation that Chaucer was an enemy to love, that is, if we mean love *paramours*. Readers have long suspected that in each case his poems of Courtly Love were meant to celebrate devotion, not of the secret lover for his *amie* but, within the bonds of matrimony, of perfectly domestic attachments. Certainly the *Book of the Duchess* mourns the death of John of Gaunt's beloved wife, in all probability the *House of Fame* and the *Parliament of Fowls* presented tidings of a betrothal for which congratulation was due. Loving wifehood is the special merit of Alceste in the *Legend*. According to the *Troilus* amorous preoccupations of a worldly sort carry their own peril and are not ultimately satisfying. In all this the poet is hardly puritanical or heavily moral, but to some of his friends, at least, he must have seemed the victim of certain frustrating convictions. In their eyes, his *joie de vivre* carried him only so far, indeed had an element of pretence in it. The man could tell lively stories with the best of them and yet in his private life he was after all pretty much the hermit. Possibly here is the reason for his frequent declaration that he is unsuccessful in love: he has had an eight years' love-sickness, he says, but gets nowhere; like Pandarus in the dance of love he "hops always

behind " But why protest so much? Well, it may have been a kind of protection for a man who did not go in for that sort of thing.

But there is another and equally plausible interpretation of his attitude, and it may as well be fairly considered. Such protests are not likely to come from a man who is really unsuccessful in love. It is silly to suppose that they are a reflection of marital unhappiness or a troublesome wife or anything like that. To be sure, shrewish wives are several times shown in the *Canterbury Tales* and their links, but so are constant and patient and submissive and devoted wives. If there was trouble in the poet's own *ménage* (caused, say, by a Flemish father-in-law "dit Paonnet" — "called peacock" or "*pauv*" — and Chaucer's making fun of the Flemish Sir Thopas), I doubt if he talked about it or made allusions to it in his verse, I doubt if it was likely to stir the spirit of fun even in his robust nature if the trouble had any gravity. If he was sensible he probably would not care to satirize his wife even by veiled allusion. On the other hand, if from time to time he attempted some other love affair and met with rejection, he would hardly proclaim it even as a joke in his verse. These things are obvious, but they seem to be occasionally forgotten by commentators. The cast-off suitor does not boast about his failure. Pandarus, it is true, openly bewails his lack of advance in such matters, and Troilus implies (I, 622) that his friend has repeatedly failed. Yet on this very point, I would suggest, Pandarus is not a wholly admirable figure, his weakness on this score fits in with his passionate zeal for helping the hero, and here, I think, is the trait that in an extremely indirect way furnishes the chief

development in his character when Shakespeare takes him over. M. Legouis was not accurate in his observation that Chaucer's Pandarus makes us see double, makes us aware, that is, of the figure in the *Filostrato* and of that in Shakespeare's play. The change in the later drama rests on the expansion of one side of Pandarus's character, and it drops most of his charm and all his freshness. The result is, not more of the same person we have had before but, a different kind of person. Except for name and function, in other words, Chaucer's intermediary would not make us think of Shakespeare's. The dramatist's character does not jest about his failures in love, he has not the almost creative delight in his task we find in Chaucer's figure, but rather a disgusted persistence. In the first point he was potentially more attractive, but when I speak of a trait that Shakespeare did develop in his revision of the story, I mean that something of the futility of Chaucer's Pandarus is carried over into the corresponding character's attitude toward his unsavory business in the play.

In general isn't it the strong and not the weak, the privately well rewarded and not the frustrated, who may pretend to have no luck in love? This is the way to kiss and not tell. One thinks of the counterpart of this in the group described in the *House of Fame* who wanted great renown for achievements:

"As wel of love as other thyng,
Al was us never broche ne ryng,
Ne elles noght, from wymmen sent,
Ne ones in her herte yment

To make us oonly frendly chere,
 But myghten temen us upon bere,
 Yet lat us to the peple seme
 Suche as the world may of us deme
 That wommen loven us for wod "

1739-1747

Pandarus in his talk with Troilus on the subject of the "avauntour" in love expresses something of the same idea (III, 302 ff.).

"And for the more part, al is untrew
 That men of yelpe, and it were brought to preve "

Troilus, III, 306-307.

The upshot of all this discussion is that if these disclaimers on Chaucer's part indicate anything, they may well indicate that in love affairs he had his own private career. But of course they are rather conventional Court of Love poetry, and no inference of the sort can really be drawn.

Yet why does he adopt such a silly convention at all? I revert to my original suggestion. Isn't it probable that this was the pose Chaucer regularly sustained in such matters among his friends? — he did not cultivate episodes of love; the natural response in jest at Court would be that he was an enemy to love; he was no preacher, and the easiest way out was to say that he had no luck. Perhaps, like the family joke Cressid turns on Pandarus, the idea furnished sport for certain ladies of elegance, accusing the poet much as the God of Love does in the *Legend*. And he was ready for them, and took up the theme on their own terms, and gave them as good as he got. The *Legend of Good Women* is at least as effective as that, with its banter "about authority and the need of

searching books for what is not found in life, and finally with its real compliment that women are less faithless than men.

I am puzzled, however, by the absence of another very important feature in the *Legend*. Aside from the Prologue why did so little poetry get into it? Why did the poet's imagination fail to waken at the opportunities in such an idea as that of the metamorphosis of Philomena? Perhaps it was the hours Chaucer set himself for writing, or perhaps it was his methodical purpose. The Prologue itself is fresh, but even there the poetry is often taken over in businesslike fashion from others, Deschamps or Froissart or another source. The fact that he chose the poetic material was partly conditioned by his plan, the freshness of spirit in the lines derived, it may be, from the poet's original zest for the opening part. The high point of his inspiration poetically was when the music of the ladies' names led him to compose the Balade, and he may have written that long before the Prologue. Here is music, but here he was not occupied with the stories of the heroines told patiently one after another to prove a point. It is odd that when he got to the stories themselves none of these famous creatures captivated him, although he had sung of them sweetly enough, not Cleopatra, not Lucrece, none of them could lure him to break over the traces of his scheme. When one stops to think of it, isn't it surprising that in the *Troilus* when he came to describe great Helen of Troy, his imagination apparently was not sent racing, as — to take an example from another realm — Swinburne's was with Guinivere in his *Tristram of Lyonesse* even at the expense, for the moment, of Iseult? Yet Chaucer's Helen is a gracious figure, and more about her

part in the story would perhaps have injured the proportion of the episode.

Possibly at the time of composing the *Legend* he still remembered Criseyde and was under her spell. There seems to be little doubt that he loved her, and he may have continued to fear her treachery in every beautiful woman. Artistically at least he had had a vivid experience of Cressid's faithlessness, and so henceforth for him faithful women existed only in books and their stories were legendary. This conception may be more than fanciful. Throughout his life his most realistic portraits of women show the faithless type. But this is not to say that here in the *Legend* he gives us only personified abstractions; even in his allegories *Doux Penser*, *Daunger*, *Idleness*, and others of the kind do not crowd his canvas, and in moving from his earlier work to his later there is no sudden jump from symbolism to real characterization. One may suspect that he neglected *Dido*, *Cleopatra*, and the rest, because his work did not begin with a consideration of what they were really like. With the exception of *Alisoun* in the *Miller's Tale* and of course *Criseyde*, he seems to notice character even before the loveliness of women. Here, I think, is something like proof that the poet did not go in for successive love affairs. Charm of course wins him but that is because it is an expression of personality, and his great ladies, *Blanche the Duchess*, *Criseyde*, the *Prioress*, the *Wife of Bath*, all have charm in abundance, but they also have distinct and rich personalities.

What then is Chaucer's contribution to the long dispute about women that furnished a theme for so many medieval writers? His ostensible offering to this literature is light-

hearted to a degree, not to say flippant. He will defend ladies, yes, but his argument is rather artificial. His mood is a bit ironic, and his work hardly absorbed his best energies. Yet one cannot say that the *Legend* represents all he had in mind on the subject. In the *Canterbury Tales* there are ladies of distinction richly and sympathetically described. He does not present the sex as faultless, he sees both good and bad. But his writing on this theme is like that which he offers on other questions, he is immensely taken with human beings, he finds them abundantly worthy of respect and liking. Women such as he presents, whether it be the distressed Constance, or wily Alisoun, or submissive Griselda, or May or Dorigen, are never soulless, never mere chattels; they are always tremendously important. For it is a curious thing that while Chaucer exposes human weakness, at that very instant he establishes human dignity. If his characters show that they have fallen, they have fallen from a level of some importance. His women are, it is true, chiefly engaged with thoughts about men, even the ladies who in the *Troilus* are found reading the romance of Thebes. But they are more than subjects merely of entertainment, and Constance, Virginia, Prudence, Griselda, and the Prioress, are meant to elicit admiration. His treatment of the problem of woman's freedom in the Wife of Bath's prologue is again ironic; but the essential question, that of *maistrye*, is really considered with due seriousness underlying the comedy of the Marriage Cycle, and the conclusion as presented in the *Franklin's Tale* shows a full understanding of woman's rights. Chaucer, intentionally or not, echoes in fact the *Roman de la Rose* as he settles the matter:

•

Love wol nat been constreyned by maistrye
Whan maistrie comth, the God of Love anon
Beteth his wynges, and farewel, he is gon!
Love is a thyng as any spirit free.
Wommen, of kynde, desiren libertee,
And nat to been constreyned as a thral,
And so doon men, if I sooth seyen shal

F 764-770.

Jean de Meun's lines about the restlessness of women here find their counterpart and answer. Dignity, freedom, respectful affection, are implicitly accorded to the sex by Chaucer's words; for he is here dealing chiefly, it must be remembered, with wedded love. On his reform tendencies, I remark elsewhere that Chaucer "spreads the contagious propaganda of a kindly view of human nature," and I may now observe that this extends to women. How often he reflects the difficulties of the domestic scene, but never with rancor! Pertelote in the *Nun's Priest's Tale* offers troublesome advice, in wifely fashion, to Chantecler, and Chantecler quotes the old diatribes against women: "Mulier est hominis confusio." Yet he sugars the pill and butters his bread at the same time; and the relation between magnificent husband and solicitous if domineering wife continues well enough in the story. There are wives who betray husbands, but there are others who do not. The Wife of Bath shows a militant suffragist rampant for her rights; but she gives away her exaggerated case even as she argues for it, and the Clerk and the others of the group furnish the corrective. Chaucer's humor, therefore, on the problem of the woman question is not fundamentally satiric; it is again a

part of his healthy attitude toward life based on a sense of proportion with the seasoning of wisdom. *Mulier est hominis confusio*, true enough; but the other side of the medal is that woman is man's joy and all his bliss. It is like the two inscriptions of the gate leading to the garden of Love in the *Parliament*. These things are not simple.

Of specific allusions to the great traditions of chivalry, the *service des dames*, the *dolce styl nuovo*, Chaucer shows surprisingly few. There is something of the sort in the picture of the knight in black who mourns the death of Blanche the Duchess, again there is something in the eagles all ready to do battle for the formel in the *Parliament*; and in the *Canterbury Tales* there is Sir Thopas galloping forth for love of a lady bright whom he has yet to meet, there are Palamon and Arcite doing battle for a lady who knows nothing of their existence, and there is the knight who rapes a lady and is punished for it. Chivalry indeed is at a low ebb during that moment in the poet's maturity when he wrote of the knight in bed with his wedded wife as follows:

He walweth and he turneth to and fro
His olde wyf lay smyllynge everemo,
And seyde, "O deere housbonde, *benedicitee!*
Fareth every knyght thus with his wyf as yet
Is this the lawe of kyng Arthures hous?
Is every knyght of his so dangerous?"

D 1085-1090.

The ennobling power of love is reflected in the *Troilus*, and the *Squire's Tale* seems to show flashes from the brilliance of former days of chivalry in such phrases as that of "Gawayn, with his olde curteisye," and the allusion to Lancelot.

But there seems to be no slightest trace of evidence that Chaucer thought about all these things as a problem — as, for example, he did, I believe, cogitate about the significance of dreams, and the paradox of free will and divine foresight. The status of woman, then, was not for him an academic question for which he had an answer ready. All his attention in such matters was fixed upon women as human beings, engaged in ordinary activities, living and breathing in their various classes of society, occupied with the virtues or weaknesses of their preference, and withal intensely human. If the poet approached the question at all, he approached it empirically. He took notes in this regard from authorities and also from personal observation of life. It may be remembered that of all his characters those which are most fit for canonization are women; his most contemptible rogues are among the men. On the other hand, his saintly women are those that derive least from real life, and seem to be held as less delightful than exemplary.

Where among all of Chaucer's portraits of women is there anyone of the stature and dignity of the great ladies of virtue assuredly available to his genius? Shakespeare has a host of them, varying in temperament and ability, like Hermione, Desdemona, both Portias, the Helena of *All's Well*, Rosalind, Beatrice, and the rest, some witty and perverse, others calm and reserved, but all clearly set forth with a serene integrity. Despite the implications of the Prologue of the *Legend*, I assume that in royalty and elsewhere in the fourteenth century a few ladies, at least, could have been seen like these, I do not believe that feminine virtue was on the upward grade for the first time in the sixteenth century.

Chaucer must have known something about Queen Philippa, there were the Duchess Blanche and John of Gaunt's second wife, Constance of Castile. In literature too there were at least the Beatrice of Dante, Chrétien's Enid, Laudine, and Lunet, Gottfried's and Thomas's Brengwain, and various afflicted ladies in the Constance saga and the story of St Eustace who protected their virtue and their children. There were besides these certain characters in allegory, like Dame Nature, Prudence, Fame, and even the Philosophia of Boethius, who suggest the dignity of educated women and their wisdom. Chaucer gives us some of these; he does retell the story of Constance, with a glance, I have no doubt, at the personal holiness of John of Gaunt's second wife. But in all his writings I find hardly more than two good women who stand out as richly characterized and important and clear. Of course he does very well by Dame Nature in the *Parliament*, and by Fame in the poem devoted to her. I am also ready to admit that Griselda approaches the distinction I have in mind, especially when she shows her human weakness in her curiosity to see the Marquis's new wife and again (later in the story) his second wife, and in her touch of rebelliousness. But even here Chaucer does not show the power of invention, the vitality of realism, which he has for his less admirable ladies, and which we expect from him when his imagination is stirred. I find him inspired in that way only twice in his work, in the case of Blanche the Duchess and again with the Prioress. Griselda, Constance, Dorigen, look in the same direction no doubt; but the portraits of Blanche and the Prioress are done at full length.

Although the description of Blanche is a composite ac-

ording to the best methods of the Manuals of Rhetoric, its details are carefully chosen and I for one find the lady a living creature in this elegy. She not only teaches the torches to burn bright; she is herself the torch from which all may borrow light. As Cressid's eyes implied "What, may I not stand here?" so hers told each friend of pardon and peace. She exceeds all, it is true, in beauty and virtue; but unlike the heroines of romance she does not send her suitors on a wild-goose chase to Tartary. Conventional as is most of the material, from her golden hair to her faultless figure, there are certain points that give her reality: "Hyr lokyng was not foly sprad," her speech was healing, "pure suffraunt was hir wyt," and her wit itself was set "Without malyce, upon gladnesse." Among ten thousand she would have been "chef myrour of al the feste." How rich in connotation that expression is! Contrast Machaut's phrase which was its source.

M'estoit miroir et exemplaire
De tous biens desirer et faire

Remede de Fortune, 171-172

A good idea is here borrowed from the French poet and touched with a wand. So the whole picture is radiant with power. In the languor of the dream, and in the somber avowal of Chaucer's knight in black, the poet makes us see the graciousness, the poise, and the detachment of the Duchess, somehow the inventory of her charms does what it was meant to do. Even in the portrait, as so often in other literary forms, Chaucer gives life to the conventional.

But presumably it is a portrait. One would like to know whether the same is true of the Prioress. Here again much has

been borrowed from sources but all is wisely chosen. Here, and as her story proceeds, the nun emerges as a great lady more realistically presented than Blanche, and — except that in her repressions perhaps or in the single focus of her dedication she may seem less of a person — as clear as the Wife of Bath. (Only a reader who feels that under strict discipline personality ceases to flower can regard her as unimportant. She has attained a position of special honor in her community, and, if we may judge from her present outlook and purpose, she holds it successfully. She has a personal distinction in manners and in bearing. She does not speak out like the Parson to rebuke worldliness, but she does rebuke by implication the monks who are not as holy as they should be.) The beginning of Chaucer's portraits is always significant: the Knight is worthy, the Monk is "a fair for the mairtrie," the Friar is wanton and merry, the Clerk has recourse to logic, the Lawyer is "war and wys," the Wife of Bath is deaf, the Parson rich in holy thought and work, the Reeve slender and choleric. These are not casual touches; the note is struck at once. In the case of the Prioress what we see first is her smile, "simple and coy." But here "coy" does not mean coquettish, rather she seems to have the gracious charm of various ladies in romance and allegory of whom the same phrase is used, and her smile is reserved. A bit later in the description we read that she was:

. . . ful plesaunt, and amyaible of port,
And peyned hire to countrefete cheere
Of court, and to been estatlich of manere,
And to ben holden digne of reverence

" A. 138-141.

The ideas go together. I cannot discover that the Parson ever wore a smile; he would have told a better story if he had. But the Prioress does know something of humor, and it may be her manners or her notion of dignity, rather than her conception of the religious life, that tends to make her narrow. It is this sense of humor combined with sensibility, with her childless life, and with the imperfect satisfactions that a person of her temperament (for she is certainly not a saint) may find in the world of religion, that gives us, not merely the little clergeoun of her story but also, her own matchless portrait exquisite in its delicacy.

Mr. Lowes has seen in her the "engagingly imperfect submergence of the feminine in the ecclesiastical." Sister Madeleva on the contrary finds in her a "picture of a woman a decade or more beyond middle age . . . sweetened and spiritually transformed by the rules and religious practises of her choice, who can be in the world without being of it, gracious without affectation, and friendly without boldness." I am not sure that the Prioress would not have been immeasurably gratified at producing just these different impressions on a modern man and a modern nun. Well, I admit I find her fascinating; but I catch certain overtones of worldliness in the description — in the sensibility, in her manners, in the little dogs, even in the brooch with all its religious associations. That we cannot be sure with Sister Madeleva about how old Madame Eglantine is, may be regarded as natural, considering the fact that most nuns in their wimples are decidedly of an uncertain age. That there is so sharp a difference of interpretation of the portrait, that the truth probably lies — not somewhere between the two

shadow of God's hand — or rather, as they too often felt, of Satan's." "Where Langland cries aloud in anger, threatening the world with hell-fire, Chaucer looks on and smiles," protests Mr. Aldous Huxley, and precisely in the same vein Mr. Coulton objects that "Where Gower sees an England more hopelessly given over to the Devil than even in Carlyle's most dyspeptic nightmares — where the robust Langland sees an impending religious Armageddon . . . there Chaucer, with incurable optimism, sees chiefly a Merry England. . . ."

The purpose of ~~this chapter~~ is to inquire whether this interesting charge is after all justified. Is it true that Chaucer saw the horrors of his day and was untouched by them, that he had access to Court for purposes of complaint and remained merely the polite entertainer? A brief survey of even medieval romance, where we find portraits of Grim and the cook in *Havelok*, the hero of *Fergus*, various realistic hags and merciful executioners, the butcher in *Octovian*, seamen, pilgrims, and beggars, not to speak of the material in fabliaux and satires and indeed in Chaucer's own sources, makes it necessary to moderate the old statement that the poet introduced the lower classes to literature. He hardly appears democratic in his handling of the mob in the *Clerk's Tale* and the *Troilus*. Like Swift did he feel affection for Hubert and Harry and Nicolas, but not so much for the "stormy people, unsad and evere untrewē," disliking the rabblement perhaps as they "shouted and clapped their chopped hands"? In the *Nun's Priest's Tale* and in the *Troilus* his allusions to Jack Straw and his "meynee," and, for that matter, that in the *Pardoner's Tale* to the Plague, are only those of a specta-

tor. Even his Friar refused to deal with any but rich folk, and, despite the pretence that social station would be set aside in the story-telling on the pilgrimage, the Knight after all led off at least for the sake of decorum. Anyone who seeks the reformer in Chaucer, and with puritan zeal disdains the man of the world, may be tempted on these terms to set him down once and for all as a cynic.

But, in any fair review of the situation, we are bound to observe at the start that the poet's opportunities at Court for suggesting measures of social reform were drastically limited. Only too readily could his audience turn away, or bid him choose another tale — as the pilgrims silenced the Monk. Yet considering the chief interest of the polite literature of his day, it is remarkable, after all, what democratic sympathy Chaucer shows — how little he has confined his material to people of high station, and what a wealth of knowledge he has of the lower classes. The millers, recches, summoners, cooks, perhaps the Canon's Yeoman, the guildsmen and their wives, not only on the pilgrimage but in the tales themselves, how sharp a contrast they make with the characters and preoccupations of romance and Court of Love literature! After Chaucer's early period he somehow happened to choose a large number of stories of humble life, and certainly he introduced at least the fabliau to respectable literary circles. Although Mr. Coulton dismisses the cottage woman of the *Nun's Priest's Tale* pretty much as a lay figure, the mother of the little Clergeoun in the *Prioress's Tale* is also a "povre wydwe," and the pathos of the story consists partly in the simplicity of the background — however traditional. In the *Clerk's Tale* the reason why serious people

condemned the applause of the mob (a passage added by Chaucer) was partly because the crowd was glad that the Marquis had taken a lady of higher lineage. This then is not really "aristocratic contempt for the multitude," and Mr. Coulton admits that ". . . all that is most touching in that tale turns on the peasant's patience under injustice. . . ."

Chaucer, however, is more outspoken in the *Parson's Tale*. Here pride in riches and lineage is again vigorously denounced, and here is the radical doctrine (borrowed no doubt, but that does not affect the case) that "of swich seed as cherles spryngen, of swich seed spryngen lordes. As wel may the cherl be saved as the lord . . . I rede thee, certes, that thou, lord, werke in swich wise with thy cherles that they rather love thee than drede. I woot wel ther is degree above degree, as reson is, and skile is that men do hir devour ther as it is due, but certes, extorcions and despit of youre underlynges is dampnable" (I. 761 ff.). This is not love of the individual and contempt for the crowd; in this light the whole section on Avarice in the *Tale* deserves to be re-read, especially such a sentence as "Thus may ye seen that the gilt disserveth thraldom, but nat nature" — not unlike Rousseau's more sentimental dictum that man is born free but everywhere we find him in chains. "Humble folk been Cristes freendes," is as fairly characteristic of Chaucer as any other quotation from his works, and need we add that the portrait of his Friar who consulted only the rich was touched with satire? But some critics will regard all this material in the *Parson's Tale* as only perfunctory. We have learned, however, that with all its light-hearted setting even the *Tale of Melibeu*s can hardly be set aside in that way. After all, the

tedious work of translating such a document means something in the poet's interest; and here especially in the tale which concludes the series it is very doubtful whether the writer offers us nothing more than an edifying and insincere performance intended as a sop to the "sad" and a pose for the orthodox. Small wonder if the poet appear like a cynic if we regard him as insincere whenever he is moral.

But we have evidence that in this case at least he meant exactly what he said. We find, in fact, that he has gone out of his way in his verse to give expression to the same ideas in passages which can hardly be quite justified in terms of the plot. In the *Wife of Bath's Tale*, in the long harangue on gentillesse, he has taken from others a discussion of the problem wherein we are told that God wills "that of hym we clayme oure gentillesse" (D. 1129-1130). In his moral ballade on the same subject he says:

For unto vertu longeth dignitee,
And nought the revers, saufly dar I deme,
Al were he mytre, croune, or diademe.
Gentillesse, 5-7

A man's a man for a' that! Similar ideas appear in the *Former Age*.

More remarkable still, perhaps, is the well-known passage against tyrants which is introduced, not into a sermon or metrical homily, but into a Court of Love poem, the prologue of the *Legend of Good Women*, apparently for the sole reason that this work was to be sent to the royal palace. Here the king is asked to have compassion on poor folk, and the passage is rendered more emphatic in the later form of

the Prologue Perhaps the occasion of this reference was the Pontefract episode of John of Gaunt, or possibly it had to do with the first petition to Parliament, in any case, the appeal for both rich and poor is here. Professor Samuel Moore remarked "We ought to recognize . . . that the matter is certainly over-emphasized, if Chaucer was concerned exclusively with the God of Love and not at all with King Richard. Alceste's speech is nearly one-fifth of the B Prologue, and more than a fifth of A " Again, the same doctrine is voiced in *Lak of Stedfastnesse* asking the King to cherish his folk and hate extortion.

(For his social theories, as in so many other matters, Chaucer found guidance in Boethius. Here was the material for *Gentilesse* and the *Former Age* and much on the subject of good and fair government. Here in his own translation he uses a phrase that seems to have passed unnoticed, a phrase with a history "Whan it was in the sowre hungry tyme, ther was establissed or cryed grevous and unplitable coempcioun, that men sayen wel it schulde gretly tormenten and endama-gen al the provynce of Campayne, I took stryf ayens the provost of the pretorie for comune profit" (*Boece*, I, pr. 4, ll 93 ff.) The "comune profit"! It corresponds to "communis commodi ratione" in the original, but the English words are found elsewhere. The phrase occurs twice in the B-text of *Piers Plowman*, where the mice and rats meet in conference and plan to bell the cat for their "common profit." Gower uses it in the *Confessio Amantis* in a Miltonic passage attacking Church controversy. It is found many times in this period, and, as the instances cited by Miss Temple and Miss Everett show, it appears in manuscripts which

deal with social questions, especially those discussing the duties of the perfect prince. Miss Allen is frank to call it a "favourite phrase of fourteenth-century Socialism, both in England and in France."

Chaucer uses it several times again, in the *Parliament* and in the *Clerk's Tale*. In the latter Griselda fulfils the perfect duty of the marchioness

The commune profit koude she redresse
 Ther nas discord, rancour, ne hevynesse
 In al that land, that she ne koude aperse,
 And wisely brynge hem alle in reste and ese
E 431 ff

It seems to have a special connotation as one observes the recurrence of the phrase here and there — like such modern expressions as "public ownership," "starvation wage," and "communism." Taking the use of this phrase together with other passages of similar import, the total evidence of Chaucer's concern for the oppressed is considerable, to say the least. His words are few, but he speaks out more than once, and indeed more than twice, with a trenchant power that a less good-natured writer would hardly command. It is quite possible that for direct action in high places he had more success than Langland or Gower. In any case, it is clear what results he wanted, and what reforms engaged his ardor. But the use of such words must not be taken to imply that the poet was primarily bent on social reform, any more than it was Wycliffe's vocation to be entertaining. What Chaucer meant by his use of "common profit" may be guessed from a passage in the *Parson's Tale*, from the same discussion on Avarice as that from which I have quoted

above: "... but for as muche as the estaat of hooly chirche ne myghte nat han be, ne the commune profit myghte nat han be kept, ne pees and rest in erthe, but if God hadde ordeyned that som men hadde hyer degrce and som men lower, therfore was sovereyntee ordeyned, to kepe and mayntene and deffenden hire underlynges or hire subgetz in resoun, as ferforth as it lith in hire power, and nat to destroyed hem ne confounde" (l. 772-773) Evidently he was not an extreme radical. If he had a sympathetic interest in the Lollard movement, it was apparently not for its heresy but for its moral sincerity and fervor. That is the theme that harmonizes his description of the Parson with the *Parson's Tale*. What the poet's own charities were, we are not likely to know, perhaps first he wrought and afterward he taught. Our critics have finally to deal with Chaucer's description of the Plowman, as sweet at heart as his brother the Parson. Here is a suggestion that the simplicity we enjoy in the account of Griselda and the little Clergeoun is native to the poet himself and not merely taken over from his sources. The Plowman had driven many a load of manure; he was an honest and a good laborer, he loved God best with all his whole heart, and did his job, paid his tithes, and didn't kick much. Idealistically or not, the Plowman is meant to be a type, representing a whole group: in his stout figure he includes the whole class of decent laboring-men.

Chaucer's optimism consists in stressing the positive, more than in denying the negative, but his didacticism is none the less real for all that. He spreads the contagious propaganda of a kindly view of human nature. In the fourteenth cen-

tury it is noteworthy that he extends this kindly view to the lower classes, even when he is talking with kings, and his influence inevitably would tend to create a broader social sympathy. Gower and Langland give all the necessary evidence that they pitied the poor. Chaucer without sentimentality appears to have loved them.

Chapter VIII

CHAUCER AND MEDIEVAL ROMANCE

CHIVALRY, we are told, received its deathblow from the rise of the merchant class — a theory which seems to rest on the popular notion that industrialism is always to be blamed for a collapse of ideals. Some historians, however, point out that chivalry waned contemporaneously with the Crusades. Still others recall the fact that in warfare the knight became impractical when the unmounted yeoman grew in prestige. Many are the causes that lead to changes of this kind. Whatever may be the truth in this case, it is safe to say that when Chaucer was alive and hale fully one hundred and fifty years had passed since the time when men rescued fair ladies from famished dragons. To Chrétien de Troyes and other minstrels of his period there was doubtless an element of stout realism in the recovery of Guinivere, or in the quest of the Grail. The twelfth century still had the lure of the Holy Land to draw its fervor, and the magic of the Far East to make it believe that nothing is but what is not. Through the numberless romances the knights became familiar figures, and the very quantity of romantic literature tended to reduce the quantity, if not the quality, of romance. Realism becomes difficult with distance, however, and in the fourteenth century it was rather to the imagination which found special glamor in the remote or impossible

that these stories offered an appeal. Perhaps this is another instance of an old idealism becoming transmuted into poetry, the religion of chivalry giving place to its mythology.

Without question there were some excellent stories written under the impulse of the alliterative revival, but these seem to have been mostly translations or revisions of old material. To "olde bokes" one had to go for the original, — "as men may in thise olde gestes rede," — for in Chaucer's day Gawain "with his olde curtesye" has gone forever to fairy, and Lancelot, who knew so well of "subtil looking and dissymulynge" and all the form of courtliness, he, alas! is dead! With the romances of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries the case is somewhat different. Occasionally, it is true, an author strives to give the impression that he has found his source in some ancient manuscript, for what writer in the Middle Ages did not prefer to call up authorities from the vasty deep, if possible? But, often as not, the beginnings are abrupt, with no apology except that the tale is a good one.

Considering the multitude of romances in the earlier period, then, it seems likely that one reason for the number of competent or artistic productions in the late fourteenth century, including the Constance group and *Syr Gawayn and the Grene Knyght*, which show a power that depends on more than a survival of interest, is that they already offered the charm of the antique. The use of alliteration seems to support this idea. In relation to the whole field, therefore, Chaucer is in a position similar to that of Malory and Spenser.

From this point of view it is worth fresh inquiry to dis-

cover what is Chaucer's response to the thoroughly romantic appeal of this subject matter, which any well-read man of his day could hardly escape knowing pretty extensively. The term "romantic" in such a connection deserves an explanation, perhaps, and yet it seems natural and fitting for the word to mean "whatever has to do with romances." In that sense the implications are, for a while at least, clear, and thus it may stand for the course of this discussion. To what extent does the romantic quality (or the quality of the romances) appear in Chaucer's work? By glancing over the five hundred years of criticism and allusion which Miss Spurgeon has collected for us, one may learn from various angles the nature of Chaucer's realism; and it is essential to continue to enrich our interpretation of this side of his nature. But what is he as a romanticist? Is he so steadily the realist that he never lives in Arcady? By his time the oaks were old in Sherwood Forest and probably in Arden too!

As a matter of fact, a critic in a scientific age may become almost depressed in spirit when he observes the quantity of Chaucer's poetry which, in some way or another, seems to belong to the category of romance. This is no realist, whose reading was so one-sided. Even his speech echoes the romantic language. A collection of interesting examples has been made, and here may be found such figures as: "ful lyk a fiers leoun," "as freshe as is the brighte someres day," "freshe as faucon comen out of muwe," "whyte as foom" — figures that the casual reader might think were taken from a fine observation of real life, which a realist's inquiring eye could make. Furthermore, in all his works there are allusions to romantic material. The *Book of the Duchess* refers to the

cycles of Troy, Alexander, and Charlemagne, and includes an entirely unnecessary borrowing from *Octovian Imperator*. The poem called *Against Women Unconstant* brings in Candace and Criseyde. The *House of Fame*, packed with properties from the romantic storehouse, adds Arthurian sources in the allusions to English Geoffrey and to Isolde. The *Parliament of Fowls*, *Anelida and Arcite*, and the *Knight's Tale* owe a substantial debt to the Cycle of Thebes. The *Troilus* calls up Troy for the space of a love affair. The *Legend of Good Women* gives us Trojan material. The *Man of Law's Tale* belongs to the Constance group. The *Monk's Tale* presents the story of Alexander. The *Nun's Priest's Tale* alludes to Lancelot and Ganilon. *Sir Thopas* is a parody of romance. The *Wife of Bath's Tale* gives us the Loathly Lady, the *Clerk's Tale* belongs to the Griselda cycle and the *Lai le Freine* group, the *Squire's Tale* is of true romance all compact — as far as it goes, the *Merchant's Tale* alludes to the "paradys terrestre," to Wade's boat, and to Pluto, King of Fairye, who, the footnotes tell us, comes from *Sir Orpheus*; the *Franklin's Tale* is a lay, and the *Manciple's Tale* might just as well be as not.

Such a summary as this is pardonable in view of the total effect, to recall with some vividness the pertinent fact that subject matter which in some way or other is related to romance is widely used in Chaucer's works. One might go further and observe that romance-reading in a book was as characteristic of Chaucer's maturity as of his youth, and that, if frequency of allusion counts for anything, the matter of Troy appears most largely. We might go on to add that, except for an occasional moral lapse into the didactic or

pious, Chaucer never quite got away from the spell of the romantic, that the realistic forms of literature, such as the satires or *débats*, do not seem to have caught his interest much, unless you bother with the *fabliaux*, which, being human, he could hardly avoid.

But most of these inferences, and, indeed, much of this material, vanish on closer examination.

He clapte his handes two,
And farewel' al oure revel was ago.

F 1203-1204.

In all the works many of the allusions come second-hand from the *Roman de la Rose*. Many of the similes and metaphors which are found in general use in Chaucer and in the romances were probably also current in the ordinary speech of the day ("whyt as foom" depends neither on romantic imagination nor acute powers of observation). Or, in some cases, the stories come from works which are anything but romantic in nature. Thus Chaucer may have taken his material on Alexander partly from Quintus Curtius or from the tale in the *Gesta Romanorum*, and that on Constance from the Anglo-Norman Chronicle and Gower, that on Griselda from Petrarch's treatise. Even references like that to Octovyen in the *Book of the Duchess*, and that to Pluto, King of Fairye, in the *Merchant's Tale*, are of dubious origin. Perhaps Octovyen is brought in, not by way of romance at all, but as the emperor of the Golden Age, which, the poet thus implies, obtained during the happy reign of Edward the Third. It is similarly that Deschamps several times refers to him. "Quant verray je le temps Octovien," he asks,

"Que toute paix fut au monde affermée." And, as it happens, Pluto is mentioned neither in *Sir Orpheo* nor in *King Orfeo* as the King of Fairye, but as an ancestor of Orpheo's father. Even in the *Troilus*, when the ladies are listening to the "Sege of Thebes" (an episode which is not in the *Filostrato*), what they hear is apparently the "geste" of Statius, and not a romance at all.

So one might continue. The mention of a "romaunce" in the *Book of the Duchess* may refer to Ovid, or more likely to the *Dit de la Fonteinne Amoureuse*. One scholar has suggested that the poet seems to have taken prose romances rather lightly. After thoroughly going over the whole ground of Chaucer's "learning," Miss Hammond made an even more extreme statement. "Were it not for the full knowledge of the English metrical romances displayed in the Rime of Sir Thopas," she remarks, "we might have assumed that Chaucer had done no reading in that field, and had picked up the allusions to Gawain as courteous, Tristram and Lancelot as typical lovers, and Arthur's court as the centre of chivalry, from the literary commonplace of his time."

But surely exception should be made for the works which borrow most liberally from documents of this kind — namely, in the case of the *Troilus* from the *Filostrato* and the *Knight's Tale* from the *Teseide*! Long ago, however, with an acumen which has been common property ever since, Professor Ker observed that "Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde* is the poem in which medieval romance passes out of itself into the form of the modern novel." If he found his plot in a romance, therefore (although I am not sure that the *Filostrato*, if "graceful," is quite so "superficial" as Mr. Ker

seems to imply), he straightway changed the tone and quality of his story and produced something else. Professor Karl Young has argued to different effect, and has tried to put the *Troilus* back into the romantic category once more. His study is useful in so far as it makes clear the features in which Chaucer has intensified the romantic values of the poem. But a classification to be illuminating, I think, must reveal more than that. Chaucer has intensified *all* the values of the poem. The ways in which it differs significantly from its source have to do with its philosophy and with its realistic treatment of character. Granting that some romances show a fair degree of characterization, we must observe that when they do they approach the novel, and that in this respect Chaucer's poem leads them all, leaving far behind the world of mere glamor and supernaturalistic thrills. Or no, I am mistaken! — it is a tragedy, is it not, in which the youthful characters introduce the saving presence of humor? What then of the *Teseide* and Chaucer's transformation of that poem for the purposes of his Knight? This Italian *magnum opus*, which, according to Mr. Ker, is "the first of the solemn row of modern epics," becomes, he thought, "a complete and perfect version of a medieval romance, worked out with all the resources of Chaucer's literary study and reflexion. . . ." Here, we may suppose, is his most nearly perfect expression of the romantic spirit.

But when we stop to think of the nature of true romance, as it has endeared itself to readers, and obtained a permanency in literature as a special type, does this observation seem quite satisfactory? At first sight it is more plausible, I believe, than Mr. Young's similar comment on the *Troilus*. But let us

remember the obvious fact that for critical purposes at least it is hardly profitable to classify as romance every sort of literary production in the Middle Ages which will not fit in with the religious, didactic, dramatic, or satiric writings. Nor is the proper criterion to be based on such treatments of subject matter as the use of adventure or the emphasis on love, for while romance persists in later periods in a duly recognizable form, adventure and love are found useful, not only here but elsewhere, among realists and even allegorists. The characteristic which marks romance, I think, and defines its quality is rather a primary appeal, through the nature or the manipulation of the subject matter, to the imagination. "Romance means nothing, if it does not convey some notion of mystery and fantasy," said Mr. Kcr.

Remote or mysterious or fanciful the stuff of which it is made may be, or again, the things it presents may not be so very far off or unhappy, nor the battles those of so very long ago, but in either case the imagination is touched, follows readily, and comprehends, while one's reason is mystified or held in abeyance. The use of creatures only to be seen at twilight, a special absence of explanations, a departure from that air of verisimilitude where the reader is tempted to check up the veracity of the author, these traits are what we delight in when we read the stories of the French Vulgate, or the late and essentially romantic stories of Charlemagne, or such tales as the *Avontyrs of Arthure at the Terne Wathelyn*. Not that realism is never used, but that when it is, romance, for the while, is less evident. When the table of food appears without even a wicked steward to account for it, or when Parsifal fails to ask the question which will relieve the

stricken king — then, call it the mood of wonder, if you like, the artistic satisfaction comes by way of the imagination. This, let it be understood, is no attempt to define the meaning of nineteenth-century romanticism, which introduces enough and differently baffling problems of its own. This refers rather to what is strictly within the fold of medieval romance, and perhaps it is only another way of indicating what one critic has called the “incredible” nature of the material.

Whatever be the terms used to describe it, the quality itself is clear, I think, and this quality hardly predominates in the *Knight's Tale*. Mr. Ker had in mind, obviously, the historical rather than a critical use of the word “romance,” and, on that ground, his dictum is valid. Yet in *Epic and Romance*, where the discussion in question occurs, his task is mainly to give a critical meaning to this expression, and so he challenges fresh criticism with the effort.

In revising Boccaccio's story it does not appear that Chaucer made any changes in the general direction of what we have described as romantic. Among other modifications he quite deliberately introduced the following important ones. First, the long warfare at the beginning is omitted, and the emphasis falls at once on the relationship of the three characters — Palamon, Arcite, and Emelye. Secondly, the element of chance, often so vital to romantic literature, is diminished by the development in some respects of what Mr. Ker called the “classical panoply.” Thirdly, the irony of the story, based in part on the parallelism of the two lovers, is greatly magnified in importance, and, by the omission of Arcite's long complaint and the substitution for it of his

speech, "Allas, why pleynen folk so in commune" (A. 1251 ff.), the sentimentality of the original is much reduced.

In regard to the second of these points, one cannot fail to observe the humor which is included when Saturn is called upon to settle the controversy between Venus and Mars. It seems, these deities have too promptly answered the prayers addressed to them, without consultation as to the merits of those who have prayed. As to Dame Fortune, although she is constantly blamed in Boccaccio for the action of the tragedy, Chaucer tends to ignore her and adds a passage from Boethius in which Destiny is described as the servant of God. Chaucer speaks of

The destinee, minstre general,
That executeth in the world over al
The purveiaunce that God hath seyn biforn .

A 1663-1665

This passage strengthens the plot at the moment of its greatest weakness, the moment when Theseus happens to come upon the two fighters. Instead of ascribing the coincidence to the workings of Fortune, Chaucer explains that it is only one of the strange episodes which Destiny has brought to pass, not through caprice, but as part of the Divine plan. Boccaccio refers elsewhere to "l'alta ministra del mondo Fortuna," and thus in the *Knight's Tale* we find a reminiscence of this line in the *Teseide* and also of Dante's "general ministra e duce" where Fortune herself is represented as God's handmaid. The control of Chaucer's story is, therefore, rational rather than casual, a point which may explain why the merits of the heroes are more nearly taken into account, and why Palamon rather than Arcite, as in the

Teseide, is the first to see Emelye (since the plot requires that he be the hero ultimately to win her). This does not obviate the condition that Arcite's fate is still something of a sentimental tragedy, but it is certainly true that the emphasis on this side of the story is lightened. Enjoyment of the characters outweighs paradoxically our concern for them. In the loss of Arcite we are not inconsolable for:

" certainly a man hath moost honour
To dyen in his excellence and flour . "

A 3047-3048

Character is enriched in Chaucer's version even at the expense of the splendor of the tournament and the excitement of combat. Thus there is no intention here of creating a romance of chivalry, if in such literature passages at arms are of chief importance. Nor is the love affair stressed for its own sake so much as for the humor it reflects upon the heroes. With remarkably simple technique Chaucer's story gives us the irony of youth, the irony of young men in their tremendous concern for a young lady, and the opportunity for dramatic reflections of that kind is what, I think, originally commended the plot to the special interest of the English poet. In this quality and in the symmetrical structure the story closely resembles *Troilus and Criseyde*, to which it probably stands closest in time of composition.

Notice that hardly a moment is lost before we come to the two young knights lying "by and by" "bothe in oon armes" —

Of whiche two Arcita highte that oon,
And that oother knyght highte Palamon,

A. 1013-1014.

which gains in effect if you fall into a slight singsong as you read it. Both of them become pale "as asshen colde" under stress of their experiences within and without the prison wall, and of their retinue in the tournament we are told:

So evene, withouten variacioun,
 Ther nere swiche compaignyes tweye
 A 2588-2589

Their parallelism might be compared, without offense, to that of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, and their battle — not to be profane — might evoke memories of Tweedledum and Tweedledee, but the very exaggeration involved in the comparison ruins its critical meaning and should not be tolerated — after it is once said. Besides, Chaucer has made the heroes so much alive, and we are so sympathetic with their desperate case, that any observation of their similarity is clumsy. Arcite is the more manly figure, a true knight; Palamon is steadfastly the lover, who is willing to turn state's evidence to win his game. "Palamon is much more passionate and jealous," remarked ten Brink, "much less magnanimous than the corresponding character in Boccaccio, and Arcite also becomes much more positive and violent in [Chaucer's] hands."

In many ways the humor of the poem turns on the characterization. There is nothing in the *Teseide* to match the intense youth of Palamon's speech to Theseus. "Slay me," he cries, but quickly adds,

"Or sle hym first, for though thou knowest it lite,
 This is thy mortal foo, this is Arcite . . ."

Nor is there anything to match the flavor of the sentimentalism into which Theseus falls in discoursing on his ancient loves:

"A man moot ben a fool, or yong or oold, —
I woot it by myself ful yore agon,
For in my tyme a servant was I oon "

A 1812-1814

This is a whole world different from "Ma perchè gia innamorato fui," which is pretty cold logic. Take the very speech already cited, in which Arcite bursts forth:

"Allas, why pleynen folk so in commune
On purveiaunce of God, or of Fortune "

A 1251-1252

While he thus complains that he is now out of prison (at a time when Palamon is lamenting that he himself has not been able to get free), Arcite is unaware that this is his first step in the process of actually obtaining a sight of Emelye. But the points of irony in the *Knight's Tale* have been often listed. It is hardly necessary to recall that one knight wins the tournament but fails to get the lady, while the other loses in the joust but gets her. Nor must I observe here that, although there is pathos in the death of Arcite, genuine as it is, even that receives a new touch in such a passage as the following:

"Why woldestow be deed," thise wommen crye,
"And haddest gold ynough, and Emelye?"

A 2835-2836

(I realize that I have quoted these lines before, but I expect to quote them, in due course, many times.) We do not dwell too long on the funeral or follow Arcite's soul through the

spheres as Boccaccio wanted us to. Nor need I mention the fact that Chaucer provides us with the "delicious Egcus," and also with the speech of his son, who seems to have something in his blood from "these tedious old fools." Nor must I add that in his description of the funeral pyre and the funeral, Chaucer uses that quite familiar formula of abbreviators — "I do not need to tell you," "I need not observe," "nor do I need to recall" — which serves so often as an underhanded device for setting forth old material, and that he then gives an interminable list of details of supposed solemnity:

But how the fyr was maked up on hughte,
 Ne eek the names that the trees highte,
 As ook, firre, birch, aspe, alder, holm, popler,
 Wylugh, elm, plane, assh, box, chasteyn, lynde, laurer,
 Mapul, thorn, bech, hasel, ew, whuppeltree, —
 How they weren feld, shal nat be toold for me,
 Ne hou the goddes ronnen up and down,
 Disherited of hire habitacioun,
 In whiche they woneden in reste and pees,
 Nymphes, fawnes, and amadrides,
 Ne hou the beestes and the briddes alle
 Fledden for fere, whan the wode was falle,
 Ne how the ground agast was of the light —

A 2919-2931

and so on, for thirty lines and more.

One critic has observed the changes that the poet makes for the sake of realism, especially in the feudal elements of the story; and another has pointed out that in the garden scene we feel a clear impulse from the vernal wood. But obviously that is not all. It is the tone of something rather

like levity which is most surprising in this tale. The Knight seems to have cared less for the mysterious and the uncanny than for some other things, and, above all, he has a sense of humor. With a sympathy the more wholesome for his grace, he gives us the tragedy of youth, by means of a characterization which is not over-individualized but sure.

All this bears directly on Mr. Ker's definitions. "The success of epic poetry," he said, "depends on the author's power of imagining and representing characters . . . Without dramatic representation of the characters, epic is mere history or romance. . . ." "The history of the early heroic literature of the Teutonic tongues, and of the epics of old France, comes to an end in the victory of various romantic schools. . . . From within and without, from the resources of native mythology and superstition and from the fascination of Welsh and Arabian stories, there came the temptation to forget the study of character. . . ." These passages in their own context in *Epic and Romance* show that character is the main interest of the epic. But, while it would be absurd to argue that the *Knight's Tale* belongs to that type, the changes that Chaucer made in his material are certainly not pointed the other way.

On the other hand, I would not try to maintain that humor and dramatic irony are absent in the romances. We find good dramatic irony in that burly production, *Havelok*, where the hero and Goldborough are loathe to wed because they both think that Havelok's station is too low for such a union. In *King Horn* there is irony where Athulf longs for Horn's arrival — when as a matter of fact he is present all the time. The many recognition scenes in other poems in-

volve in some cases the same implication. If the *Knight's Tale* must be a romance, I would say that it is after the manner of the English Cycle. Characterization too is not foreign to romance. One thinks of the tradition of Sir Kay and of Gawain, or of such figures as the butcher in *Octovian*. You can go even further, and say that not all of the known romances are purely romantic. But the distinguishing quality of this kind of literature, that expression of the imagination "that possesses" — Mr Ker himself put it thus — "the mystery and the spell of everything remote and unattainable," is not what Chaucer contributed, any more than it is what he found in his source. One may question whether humor creates a healthy atmosphere for such a quality, and whether, if the *Knight's Tale* be classified as romance, such pigeonholing tells anything about the romantic temper in Chaucer.

Yet no one is likely to say, with Lowell, that in *Sir Thopas* Chaucer gives the *coup de grâce* to chivalry. The *Squire's Tale* is an answer to that. Unfinished as it is, and drawn, not from the traditional cycles but from Oriental material received, probably, at second hand, it shows a conscious effort at a sustained performance in the romantic vein, and it seems to have sprung from the poet's ripest years. Grant that the *Wife of Bath's Tale* is mainly satiric, and the *Franklin's Tale* domestic, and you still have a residue of isolated passages which show the same spirit.

Indeed it is possible to make out a good case for the theory that the *House of Fame* was written for the appeal of romantic adventure. This is not to say that no allegorical intention was implied, or that personal allusions were totally absent

(or were to be in the finished product). But the wealth of material, borrowed for this poem from romantic sources, or related to interests of that kind, leads one to suspect that Chaucer meant to go beyond the machinery of the Court of Love; at least one can be sure that he was not content with that alone. In the Alexander Cycle, only to cite one group of parallels, we find the same desolate wastes and extraordinary mountains, as well as the flight up into the skies which Chaucer knew and mentions. The alliterative *Wars*, which tells of Alexander's flight with the griffons, also describes a "wilsom waste and wild and wondirly cold," and a valley "where flakes of snow fall from heaven" and "sparks of fire fall like rain," recalling distinctly the desert scene in the *Inferno*, which Chaucer himself remembered. With such descriptions at hand one may ask why Chaucer failed to write an actual romance. Perhaps he was more concerned with his search for tidings. Perhaps, as in the case of the Knight, his humor was far too mischievous when he told this story.

The fact remains that there seem to have been odd moments when he, too, held Lancelot de Lake in full great reverence, or had, at least, a glimpse of things romantic of which the spell still lingers here and there in his poetry. Any creature of the land-beyond-the-mist would testify to the "authentic note" sounded in such a description as that of the scene

. . . under a forest syde,
 Wher as he saugh upon a daunce go
 Of ladyes foure and twenty, and yet mo,
 Toward the whiche daunce he drow ful yerne,
 In hope that som wysdom sholde he lerne

But certainly, er he cam fully there,
Vanysshed was this daunce, he nyste where
D 990-996

This charming episode he borrowed (I suppose from Walter Map) like many another, but that does not affect the point. One reason that definitions of romance have been so difficult to agree upon is that a prime essential of the romantic is its elusiveness. Is it pedantic to hint that this is what marks the hovering quality in such passages in Chaucer's verse? The words themselves have magic. As Logan Pearsall Smith observed regarding some poetry that moved him, "Such lines open for me portals into realms of beauty and fear and strangeness. . . ." At any rate it is no disparagement to claim that Chaucer, like many another, looked through magic casements in his day, and that his realism was none the worse for it.

ideas on the subject. Much is fairly certain at the outset. Thus when Criseyde demands assurance of Troilus's fidelity, no reader can miss the irony

"And that ye me wolde han as faste in mynde
As I have yow, that wolde I vow biseche,
And if I wiste sothly that to fynde,
God myghte nought a poynt my jones eche."

III, 1506-1509

In the beauty of the moment and Cressid's obvious sincerity, there is pathos in this appeal. Knowing what will spring from her weakness, however, we find something more grim in her complaint when she faces the problem of separation from her lover

She seide, "How shal he don, and ich also?
How sholde I lyve, if that I from hym twynne?"

IV, 757-758

Well, we know how she will live, and so does everybody. and the knowledge colors our reading of her whole lament:

"To what fyn sholde I lyve and sorwen thus?
How sholde a fissh withouten water dure?
What is Criseyde worth, from Troilus?"

IV, 764-766.

Another quality appears in the irony of her speech when she has left Troy and is gazing back upon its towers and halls. Not long before this we have seen Troilus visiting her empty house and looking from the walls of the city toward the Greek camp. "Lo, yonder is myn owene lady free," he said. And now Cressid, on the other side (perhaps some days later), looks back.

"O Troilus, what dostow now?" she seyde.

"Lord! wheyther thow yet thenke upon Criseyde?"

v, 734-735

There is obvious humor in the mixture. But these are all simple examples, varied as they are. Something subtler perhaps is found in Troilus's line, when he stands recalling his lady's departure: "And yond I saugh hire to hire fader ride" (v, 612); we are likely to remember that she rode off with Diomedes, who began at once to make love to her. Something of the sort there is also in Diomedes's pledge of fidelity to Criseyde in that very scene:

"Yeve me youre hond, I am, and shal ben ay,
God helpe me so, while that my lyf may dure,
Youre owene aboven every creature"

v, 152-154

The changes rung on the theme of fidelity in this poem are extraordinary, and it furnishes the essential unity of the story by touching every episode.

The promise Diomedes makes to Cressid is anticipated in the similar vow that Troilus made on his own first meeting with her:

. . "God woot, for I have,
As ferforthly as I have had konnyng,
Ben youre al, God so my soule save,
And shal, til that I, woful wight, be grave!"

III, 100-103.

So as one turns the pages one may discover many points of irony that have to do with the same idea. Here we may note

the words with which Pandarus originally congratulated the hero on his love.

"Love hath byset the wel, be of good cheere!"

1, 879

"So oughtest thou, for nought but good it is
To loven wel, and in a worthy place,
The oughte nat to clepe it hap, but grace "

1, 894-896

"And thynk wel, she of whom rist al thi wo
Hereafter may thy comfort be also "

1, 944-945

So all of Pandarus's efforts to bring his friend to bliss have something of the same quality, especially in his own excitement. Sharper still is the feeling in Cressid's own review of the situation, in which she tries to decide whether she will give herself up to this affair or not:

" ek men ben so untrewē,
That, right anon as cessed is hire lest,
So cesseth love, and forth to love a newe "

11, 786-788

"How ofte tyme hath it yknownen be,
The tresoun that to wommen hath ben do!"

11, 792-793.

Still richer irony appears in certain details, as, for example, in the request of Deiphebus that Troilus come to the help of the heroine.

Deiphebus had hym preied over nyght
To ben a frend and helpyng to Crseyde

11, 1549-1550.

Here Chaucer points it by adding, "God woot that he it graunted anonright. . . ." But there is another layer of meaning here that may escape notice, unless we observe that by thus lending his help to his lady Troilus brings on his own doom; she becomes a treacherous friend to him. Here is what I have called the optimistic type of irony, but now it has a bitter relish. So too has Helen's greeting to him: "Now, faire brother, beth al hool, I preye!" (II, 1670.)

Lines such as these have a complex of associations and meanings. But even at the risk of apparent surrender to those who will charge us with reading too much into such a scene, I hesitate to lay bare all the nerves that carry its vitality. The more one reads the poem the more one has the pleasure of finding in it new parallels, new reflections, new rays of the ironic interplay between one character and another, one scene and another. I shall limit myself here to pointing out an especially delicious form of optimistic irony of the sort peculiar to the Troilus. Pandarus has pleaded for his friend with the reluctant Criseyde, but she warns him:

"And here I make a protestacioun,
That in this proces if ye depper go,
That certeynly, for no salvacioun
Of yow, though that ye sterven bothe two,
Though al the world on o day be my fo,
Ne shal I nevere of hym han other routhe" —
"I graunte wel," quod Pandare, "by my trowthe"

II, 484-490

What is it she offers? "Myn honour sauf," she will "plese hym fro day to day." This is what she has just said. But of course we know that Pandarus and Troilus will want more,

and she will grant it And what is more, she must be aware that she will grant it — or at least a part of her is aware. For it is not long before she asks, "Kan he wel speke of love?" (II, 503.) The fact is, all through this scene she tries ostensibly to deceive Pandarus, and he tries ostensibly to deceive her. But she partly knows that he understands her real intent, and she is partly aware that he is conscious of her knowing this. Here two worldly wise people save their faces by what they say, and convey their real thoughts by overtones. Not for an instant is Pandarus ever plunged into real discouragement by Cressid's rebukes and warnings That is why in a later scene he dares to thrust the letter into her bosom and knows she will read it and answer it. That is also why, when later Pandarus invites the lady to his house on the rainy night, she is perfectly sure that Troilus is there, but does not tell herself so. The music that we get from these magnificent characters has more than two voices.

It is well that *Troilus and Criseyde* has often been studied as drama; for it has so much of that prime essential of dramatic art, irony based on action and interaction In contrast with familiar examples, such as that of Oedipus in search of the criminal who has brought the curse upon Thebes, it shows something far less grim. But it has amazing variety in form and quality. And we are so used to such implications in Criseyde's speech that the effect carries over into one expression of hers where we cannot really know its full value because we do not know the future: that is when she says, "To Diomedes algate I wol be trewe" (V, 1071). This desperate cry has an ironic power in spite of her purpose. Thus it is no exaggeration to say that without a perception of this

element in the poem one is bound to miss the best it has to offer. The contrast between the intention of the character and the full meaning of the scene as we the audience know it gives us that sense of fundamental incongruity on which full emotional response must in part be based. It is thus that we understand the references to love and the lyrics and the Epilogue according to the theme that runs through the poem and unites its parts. But its irony is never heavy, because, as with the *Knight's Tale*, it is a story of youth; nor is it as bitter as that in the *Merchant's Tale*, because there the narrator hated his heroine. It is not calculated to drive home a lesson, it is too sympathetic for that. It is rather the expression of a detached and mature and realistic mind, equable enough to observe that all shall pass and that odd things occur along the way. *Othello* has fiercer moments, no doubt, and *Samson Agonistes* strikes deeper notes. But Chaucer's manipulation of dramatic irony, of humor, of the 'satiric touch, shows a range and a richness as great as anything his incomparable imagination offers. It reveals not only his scope and versatility but also his power. The poet's humor itself, or whatever it is that we have considered in that rather loose category, is a sign of the health and fullness of his wisdom

Chapter X

THE DEVELOPMENT OF CHAUCER'S GENIUS

ANY CRITICAL or biographical study which attempts to indicate something of the nature of a poet's personal development is arbitrary to a certain degree and likely to be fantastic. Only the psychologist, with the assistance of the philosopher, the doctor, and the specialist in dietetics perhaps, and with a vast array of detailed records, could really hope to plot out the general lines which the career of any genius really has followed. Indeed I have thought of calling this chapter "Geoffrey Chaucer and how he grew," to suggest on the side the palpable absurdity of trying to undertake a study of anything of the sort. But inevitably and laudably critics have expended some effort on such a task with certain results which occasionally seem profitable, and with others which I believe to be entirely mistaken. My present purpose is to comment on these views, in somewhat the manner perhaps of some semi-popular address entitled "Chaucer the man," as a possible method of getting a general summary of the ideas I have here set forth. Perhaps in the negative tone of these concluding remarks it will appear that I have moved from dicamlike considerations and a trace of the poetic in the early chapters to a realistic approach and finally in the present case to a cynical attitude. If so, there will be an aesthetic appropriateness in the fact;

for such is the nature of Chaucer's development according to some critics.

To show how opinion varies on these matters I may quote Mr. A. W. Pollard's remarks: "[Chaucer's] early poems are very beautiful, but they are sentimental and a little weak, with hardly a trace of humour and no great power of characterisation. In his later poems sentiment is replaced by a not unkindly cynicism; his sense of the beauty of religion has perhaps not diminished, but he himself is less religious and grosser; his subtle humour has become infinite, and with a few masterly strokes he portrays a character to the life." Now to designate the early poems as "sentimental and a little weak, with hardly a trace of humour" — if we mean to refer to the *Parliament of Fowls* and the *House of Fame*, or even the *Book of the Duchess* — is, I believe, as completely to miss the mark as it is possible for critical aberration to do. The *Book of the Duchess* accomplishes its task by the very miracle of its being loaded with sentiment and yet not sentimental but humorous. As allegories of the Court of Love go, all three of these poems are not only anything but weak (by which I suppose that Mr. Pollard really means somewhat insipid); they are rich with meaning, at times even packed with delicious effect. I think, for example, of the account of the gates in the *Parliament* and also of the squabble of the birds, and also of the flight in the *House of Fame*. But these things hardly need to be said, or if they do, there is no use in saying them. I find myself unable to comment on the idea that with age Chaucer became less religious and grosser; for it is quite possible that he did. I can imagine his faithful attendance at the confessional box year after year (one critic concedes that the poet

may have kept faithful to his religious duties once a year), with the consequent realization on his part of no advance and even of an increase in physical girth rather than of spiritual agility. I do maintain, however, that there is no slightest trace of evidence on this point one way or another. In the *Wife of Bath's Prologue* and in the *Merchant's Tale* not a single line, not a single detail, has anything to reveal on this score. Even January's quoting the *Song of Solomon* does not tell us that the poet was less interested than of old in attaining some day to the beatific vision.

Nor does it show any taint of cynicism. With reference to such a charge I prefer ten Brink's analysis of Chaucer's development: "... formerly he moved in a world of dreams or in unattainable idealism, but now [in his later years] he prefers to stand upon the ground of reality, and, with the necessary variations, to treat of things recent and local. The preponderance of the comic element in the later effusions of his Muse depends largely on this change to realism, as does also the prevalence of the heroic couplet for the form of his verse. . . ." Let me parenthetically protest, first of all, against that phrase "the effusions of his Muse" (for which, I suppose, ten Brink was not responsible), which to my own imagination calls up something forbidding. I do not find in Chaucer's early work signs of an "unattainable idealism." But the main idea is sound — the poet's works do show a greater emphasis on what is called the realistic as the years move on. Because of literary fashion he began with the allegorical and the abstract and the somewhat typical; more and more he adopted stories and characters that carried a more immediate reference to his own experience. But that

is true only in general. In the allegories there is much that is realistic and the spirit of comedy is never wholly absent, even if in the *Legend* her smile is wan, and in the first part of the *Book of the Duchess* she is often silent. In the early works we have the same Geoffrey Chaucer that appears to us later sane, realistic, steady, possessed of that detachment which shows itself in humor. His growth is in the direction of more realism and more humor. The realism for him (because that is how he was built) releases the humor. But in all this there is nothing that hints of cynicism.

The poet began by being naïf, we are told, and ended by being cynical. I can hardly imagine two adjectives more absurdly applied. I doubt whether Geoffrey Chaucer was ever naïf, and I will hold to that observation even while I read and reread his *Tale of Melibee* and the *Parson's Tale* and his stories of Constance and Virginia and Griselda and Cecilia. There may be a self-deceiving cultivation of emotion for its own sake in his telling of the sufferings of these four latter heroines, but I doubt it, I have already discussed something of this problem. Yet as he kept these narratives for inclusion in the *Canterbury Tales*, by the same token his own nature may contain such elements of simplicity and be at the same time greater and more inclusive than any of them. Whatever his early works may be, they are certainly not naïf. If anyone ever took the machinery of Courtly Love with literal faith and devout spirit, such an attitude might be so described, but there is no evidence that anyone ever did. In general, literature that employs this material may be inept or perhaps dull, but in its own occasionally tawdry way it is sophisticated. Its allegorical analysis forces a degree of

self-consciousness. And Chaucer's use is that of an artist who is fully aware of what sort of apparatus he is borrowing; the special touch of humor he adds shows sophistication and a kind of maturity, a combination anything but naïf.

As Mr. Kittredge shows, the word as mistakenly here applied is especially ill chosen "Whatever one may think of our American practice in the appointment of diplomatists," he remarks, "it is quite certain that, in the fourteenth century, men were not selected by the English king to negotiate secret affairs on the Continent because they were innocent and artless." The positions held by Chaucer reveal the confidence with which he was regarded by the men of his day, and they tell something as well of his urbanity of nature. Yet someone may object that successful business men are often naïf when it comes to a taste in literature. Even there, however, Chaucer shows his subtlety at once in his compliment to the great Duke of Lancaster in the *Book of the Duchess*, and in the variety of his humor as he employs the artifices of the literature of Courtly Love. So if the poet early in his career shows this quality, his later indulgence (if such it is) in the simpler appeal of the *Tale of Melibee* and the story of Constance must be a temporary lapse, with a subsequent return to sophistication, say in the *Troilus* or some of the descriptions in the *General Prologue* of the *Canterbury Tales*, and then another lapse in *Trouthe* maybe, or at least the *Retraction*. If we date the *Man of Law's Tale* after the *General Prologue*, things become worse than ever. The poet is at one time sophisticated and again naïf, and we cannot exonerate him in terms of the subject matter he is using; for that varies and in any case the distinction is arbitrary. But

these suppositions are really pointless. A man is, I would insist, a generally unified creature; and in particular Chaucer shows special signs of being highly integrated. It is unlikely that he was naïf on Thursdays and sophisticated on the other days of the week.

The chances are that the notion of his naïveté has arisen as I have already suggested. It depends on our view of the subject matter he employs. When he deals in moral treatises or saints' legends the modern exclaims at his simplicity. But we have clear evidence of what the poet thought of some of this material in the setting he gave to the story of Melibeus and to that of Griselda. In his day Petrarch was nothing if not a highly sophisticated intellect, and to him the account of patient Griselda was most affecting; yet the setting that Chaucer finally gave it served to discount some of its moral effect. If the placing of the *Tale of Melibee* after the burlesque mood of the *Tale of Sir Thopas*, and the reference to it as this "little treatise," do not suggest that it be taken with a grain of salt, at least there is something of the air of a pinch of snuff about it. The real point is that from time to time the poet shows evidence of having taken his morals and religion on authority, and we cannot forgive him such credulity until he offers some signs of recanting. But he never really recants anything that has to do with the faith. His attitude toward the story of Melibeus and toward that of Griselda is natural for a man who is at ease with his morals and his idealism. It perplexes the modern to find him telling the hearty sensual story of Troilus and Criseyde, and at the same time keeping his moral judgments clear, but a Catholic can do that, or anyone whose religion is healthy. He does not compromise

morality by treating the stories of Melibeus and Griselda as he does, he only lets down their exaggerations. I fear we have no right at all to say that anyone in the fourteenth century who accepted Christian morality and saints' legends was naïf. Even in the *Retraction* Chaucer was not that. Perhaps he was frightened there, and he was probably sick. He may have had a momentary flash of insight into the values of purity and holiness, one that threw his sense of proportion out of joint. Far from being simple at this time he is more nearly subject to the charge of duplicity. But moderns will find it hard to understand how he undoubtedly escaped that.

What about the cynicism with which we are told he was much taken in later years? Such a retreat sounds a little childish, does it not? I have said elsewhere that quite possibly he went through a stage of disillusionment, but that is quite another matter. Illusions are not the alternative to cynicism; to suppose that, one would have to be truly naïf about life. I confess I do not know what illusions Chaucer cast off, perhaps some idea taken from the *dolce styl nuovo* that woman inevitably leads us upward and onward, perhaps some youthful notion that the ultimate satisfactions are those of Venus. He had emerged from the one by the time he wrote the *Troilus*, and from the other at least by the time he described the Wife of Bath. When the halfgods go, the gods arrive; and dispelling illusions releases the deeper and fuller vision. But cynicism implies, unless I much mistake, belief in very little of anything. It hints at sneering (an expression foreign to Chaucer, as Mr. Pollard's use of "not unkindly cynicism" shows he was aware) and it certainly means that the cynic is given to think poorly of his fellowmen. They are all, he would say, pretty

much moved by self-interest. Now that view I do not find in Chaucer at any time. Some of his characters, some of his pilgrims, are moved by self-interest, but others (and some of these the products of his maturest work) are not. I do not believe it is fair to say this is wholly true of the Knight or the Franklin (in the *Prologue*), or even of the Monk or the Prior-ess or the Wife of Bath. But let us consider the Wife of Bath, whose self-revelation in her proem has been sometimes taken as the height of cynical expression.

There is really too much faith in it, too much virtue, for that. It shows, even on the Wife's part, too much belief in people and in life. There is more than sensuality in the Wife's love for her fifth husband. She likes to get the better of him, but also has something more than a masochistic delight when he has the upper hand. There is rich suggestion in their final agreement:

But atte laste, with muchel care and wo,
We fille acorded by us selven two.
He yaf me al the bridel in myn hond . .

D 811-813

It carries the idea of many a scene like that where he hit her for tearing three pages out of his book, and where she gave him a good blow in return. But she got her chance on that occasion because in penitence he knelt down and said:

"Deere suster Alisoun,
As help me God! I shal thee nevere smyte "

D. 804-805.

He really loves her, and the whole scene is the more gorgeous because of the fact that these two brutal fighters love each

other desperately. The pleasure of the story lies in no respect in an exhibition of folly or futility; no interpretation which reads this episode as the revelation of mere animalism, cruelty, or any other form of self-interest, is possible. So all through the Prologue the delight is in a humor basēd, not on the exposure of mere weakness, but on robustness or vitality or assumed candor, or perhaps always as well on the portrayal of the sound value of human nature in its weakness as well as in its strength. The humor shows, not the counsel of despair to warm one's hands before a dying fire (although the Wife feels something of the sort), but an expansive and, as we have seen, characteristic belief in life.

I may take as an example the marvellous commentary the Wife gives on the story of the Samaritan woman. Our Lord has told the woman:

"Thou hast y had fyve housbondes," quod He,
 "And that ilke man that now hath thee
 Is noght thyn housbonde"

D 17-19

The Wife is enormously puzzled. Why wasn't the fifth man a husband? It worries her because she herself has had five. There is a kind of humility as well as daring in the tone of what she says:

What that He mente therby, I kan nat seyn;
 But that I axe, why that the fifthe man
 Was noon housbonde to the Samaritan
 How manye myghte she have in mariage?
 Yet herde I nevere tellen in myn age
 Upon this nombre diffinicioun.

D. 20-25.

I wish I might have been present when Chaucer thought of this wonderful poser for the Wife of Bath. To have seen his face and heard his laugh would have been to catch some of the finest essence of his personality. What a great idea it is, and how rich is the picture of the good Wife fussing about this blunder! Our joy in it, however, is not in any picture of the breakdown of a character attempting to furbish up an excuse for sexual indulgence. It must be remembered that the Wife's *joie de vivre* in itself is a good thing as far as it goes, not as a matter of self-interest but as an expression of positive vitality.

Anyone makes a great mistake who thinks that the poet jeers at virginity when he makes the Wife say:

The dart is set up for virginitee
 Cacche whoso may, who renneth best lat see
 D 75-76

He may well enjoy the humor of the idea that few will seek that prize, but that is another matter. We can see this point quite clearly further along when he writes (and the Wife says):

Virginitee is greet perfeccion,
 And contynence eek with devocion,
 But Crist, that of perfeccion is welles,
 Bad nat every wight he sholde go selle
 Al that he hadde, and gyve it to the poore
 And in swich wise folwe hym and his foore
 D 105-110.

The logic is delightful, it is also unassailable. The poet does not here launch an attack against virginity and Christian charity as well. And we miss the full meaning of the portrait

of the Wife if we suppose that the poet heartily agreed with her at every turn where she placed her emphasis and how she allowed her sophistry to function in her own behalf. If she is a heroine preaching emancipated views which her auditors (and Chaucer's) were really meant to adopt, then she is not half so funny as I find her. The superb garment of her humor vanishes, and she seems to me a rather meager prophet. Do we hear the poet's voice in the Wife's words saying, "Come, my children, listen to what I really have to tell you. Often and often I have rung the schoolbell to summon you to moral and spiritual instruction. But that was just a pose. Here before you in this good Wife is the heart of life. Take your fun as she does. Live your lives high, wide, and handsome, for that is all that is really left to us!" Neither the hypocrisy involved here nor the appeal sounds in the least like Chaucer. Moreover it entirely misses the spirit of this glorious Prologue.

The Wife takes pleasure in a rather excessive use of words that were not often spoken (even in the fourteenth century) in mixed company. Her euphemisms are not effective as such in the least, their quality lies in the fact that they conceal nothing but, on the contrary, frame the unmentionable with rococo delight. Are we to think that the poet himself took the same childish satisfaction in the bawdy? Perhaps we can more accurately guess at the date of his birth by assuming that it was a dangerous age for him when he began reading Deschamps's *Miroir de Mariage*! The Wife of Bath is far less a miraculous creation if she is the embodiment in all these details of what Chaucer believed in at this time. Of course, the fact is that he sees all around her; he detects her

pleasure in exhibitionism even to the degree of her reference to the mark of Mars "in another privee place." He knows intuitively the satisfaction she gets from suggestive language, as when she tells how she described her dream of the blood-filled bed to the attractive young clerk. Incidentally here we can see the perfect drama involved, in which Chaucer is spectator as well as creator; for the Wife obviously gets so excited with recalling her narrative of that foul dream that she forgets what comes next.

But now, sire, lat me se, what shal I seyn⁷

A ha' by God, I have my tale ageyn

D 585-586

Are we to suppose that Chaucer too was so moved that he lost track of the sequence?

But perhaps we are only to think that Chaucer's obvious liking of the Wife of Bath spells fundamental cynicism. The problem is like that of his description of the first union of Troilus and Criseyde. As artist he seems to approve of what he describes so supremely well. I think, as I have said, he enjoyed the spectacle of Troilus's winning Cressid, and as far as it goes relished the beauty of that first night. But all this could not disturb his moral judgment. So too I feel no doubt that Chaucer enormously liked the Wife of Bath, and I think M. Cazamian goes far astray when he speaks of "the cruelty that lives at the heart of her selfishness." It is, however, the depth of absurdity to suppose that for Chaucer she represented the fully admirable any more than she did the fully desirable, just as it is foolish to think that young Troilus sitting in a gloom and kicking about fate is the poet's own mouthpiece and prophet. Shakespeare found great zest, no

doubt, in the creation of Falstaff; but he also wrote "I know thee not, old man Fall to thy prayers."

We have some reason to think that what is now the *Shipman's Tale* was originally assigned to the Wife of Bath. If such was the case, we find little difference in the lady who had that story, except that her delight in cheating is later replaced by her interest in *maistrye*. What a fine counterpart the account of Dan John made for the *Franklin's Tale*, in what was perhaps an earlier Marriage Cycle! The wife's eager adultery, and the fact that both husband and wife pay the penalty of the hundred franks, stand in contrast to Dorigen's modesty and the general remitting of the debt according to the Franklin's plot. But even in what the Shipman tells, where self-interest flourishes, there is no implication that such is the whole of life and such all humanity. It is just a fabliau, and far weaker in characterization than the more optimistic *Franklin's Tale*. We cannot justly infer cynicism from the ordinary run of risqué stories they show people beguiled by tricks that are sometimes dirty and sometimes also amusing. But, as the Reeve concludes his narrative. "A gylour shal hymself bigyled be" (A 4321), and there is no gospel of cynicism in that! Chaucer has many rogues who cheat and lie and live on the fleshpots of their day, but the Wife of Bath is far better than most. If she does not discriminate she has at least a generous spirit.

But what of the flavor of the story told by the embittered Merchant? When it does not pause for sarcasm it makes room for dramatic irony. Sarcasm appears in such lines as:

A wyf is Goddes yifte verraily,
Alle othere manere yiftes hardily,

As londes, rentes, pasture, or commune,
 Or moebles, alle been yiftes of Fortune,
 That passen as a shadwe upon a wal
 But drede nat, if pleyedly speke I shal,
 A wyf wol laste, and in thyn hous endure,
 Wel lenger than thee list, paraventure

E 1311-1318

The withered old January wants his sensation, the shallow May will have her fun, and there is no one here who spends much time thinking about idealism. Even the gods above (or at least the fairies) are occupied with the earthy problem, and Proserpine has nothing but sympathy for the heroine. January's speech to his wife is heavy with irony:

"Beth to me trewe, and I wol telle yow why
 Thre thynges, certes, shal ye wyne therby.
 First, love of Crist, and to youreself honour,
 And al myn heritage, toun and tour "

E 2169-2172.

Here, if you will, is cynicism, and plenty. But it is not borne out by the general mood of the Marriage Cycle. It stands in such violent contrast to the rest of the poetry that its harshness has struck everybody, and the Merchant's grief thus expressed has received ample comment. But this cynicism, far from representing all of Chaucer, does not even represent all of the Merchant. It stands in contrast with his belief in life in general now frustrated and poisoned by his own recent experience in wedlock. The violence in mood he shows when he says of his own lady "She is a shrew at al" reveals a conflict with what he has known of happiness elsewhere and with what he thinks life can yield.

A real cynic can hardly become turbulent, if he is surprised enough at life to become excited he gives away his game. Moreover, if this bitter satire is meant to register a permanent effect upon us, Chaucer did poorly to follow it with the charm and freshness of the *Squire's Tale*. More than that, because of its greater realism, he also spoiled the effect by ending the cycle with the *Franklin's Tale*. Perhaps I should add that I am not among those who would move this latter story elsewhere or ignore the obvious and varied ties that bind together this closely knit set of stories treating of the themes of marriage, gentillesse, rhetoric, and other matters. More than all this Chaucer spoiled the effect of his cynicism (if that is what he wanted to gain) by the introductory speech of the Wife of Bath, with her abundant faith and joy tainted with few negatives.

Let us with relief return to her. One important moral of her poem, I take it, is that she holds not worth a leek the mouse that has only one hole to escape to. There, if you will, is self-interest and a pretty humdrum view of human nature. But are we to suppose that what Chaucer liked here was the evidence that the Wife wasn't taken in by much, that she knew her way about, that at the funeral of one husband she was sizing up the ankles of a man who might prove to be another mate for her? Well, perhaps! But with all her resourcefulness the Wife does not always succeed, exasperation is a note of her Prologue quite as often as triumph. The truth is that critics are likely to see Chaucer's adoration where their own approval falls. Catholics will look for proof that the poet was loyal to his religion; moderns will try to see in him that shrewd eye which they think to find in modern disil-

lusionment. If the critic himself rejoices in cynicism, then he will be eager to find the poet turning more and more cynical as the years advance, because it is gratifying to discover that a genius has as much good sense as oneself. But I find really no evidence that Chaucer turned cynical. In this I may myself end on a naively romantic note because I am eager to find just this conclusion; cynicism is not a mark of greatness, and Chaucer is great. I insist that there is ample evidence that he was not touched with this disease, evidence in the many disturbing signs of optimism and faith and general health of outlook in the poet.

A cynic's laugh, I should imagine, must be bitter. What might give him joy in seeing life on its lowest terms would be either an egoistic satisfaction at not being fooled himself and at seeing others fooled, or possibly a fine serenity based on the consciousness that one could hardly be surprised at any pitfalls again. But neither emotion, I think, could serve to provide a happy laughter which contains an element of hope. This, I may say, is what I hear in Chaucer's poetry over and over again. The realist is not depressed as he goes on. The portrait of the Wife of Bath, done in Chaucer's maturity, shows less of a spiritual person than that of Blanche the Duchess, done in his "youth." That is true enough. But by the time the Wife came lunging on horseback over the horizon, the poet had also created the Prioress, and had thought considerably of the virtues of the Plowman and the Parson. There is, for all I have said on the subject in earlier chapters, a kind of mysticism in the *Canterbury Tales*. It is not primarily in thoughts of the shrine toward which the pilgrims are moving. It is a little expressed in certain exalted pas-

sages like the lines based on St Bernard's prayer. It is found in the sufferings of characters like Constance and Griselda and Virginia, who, it is exceedingly important to note, are not sentimental heroines destroyed by overwhelming fate but willing victims and so in their way saintly. But most of all it is found in the hearty belief in human nature that comes out in the positive and sunny humor surrounding even Nicholas and Alisoun, the Wife of Bath and the naughty Friar. Where we find torture as with the Merchant and the Pardoner, the exception tests the rule. Even here, however, the violent negative is not always emphasized and it sets off the positive elsewhere in relief.

We may see Chaucer's development through the various periods of his life less, I think, in terms of an occasional lapse into this mood or that, whether naïf, sentimental, sophisticated or cynical, than in a perceptible flowering and enrichment of talents he seems to have possessed at the outset. In the various types that come to Fame asking for one reward or another there is an expression of what by itself might be regarded as cynicism. For instance there is the group of idle wretches who nevertheless want (and obtain) an undeserved reputation. If we should isolate that part of the story we might say that it showed the poet in a state of sad disillusionment. In the *Parliament* there is the black inscription of the gate of Love. But such passages are balanced by others, and the total effect is that which implies a poet of a rounded and well-endowed personality. There is the hopeful humor of the *Book of the Duchess*, a mood that in different ways continues in the other early works and prevails even in the background of *Troilus and Criseyde*. This too is found in his later

poems, the same spirit of detachment and sense of proportion and sane amusement, not destructive and pessimistic but with a kind of healthy promise in it (as with Fielding's satire) that life will be found good. This is really what we have, I think, all through the Wife of Bath's Prologue as well as in her story. It gives an impression of well-being and essential soundness. Nowhere does it suggest the disruption of moral principles or any exposure of their failure. For all through Chaucer's poetry, however much these may be violated by the characters, we have the abiding certainty that such principles are ingrained in the fabric of life itself. May's successful venture in the garden does not ultimately convey the idea that the world is safe for immorality. May, the Wife of Bath, Alisoun, and the others of this type, appear for what they really are against the general background of the world and experience, the sum total of which serves mercilessly to reveal their shortcomings. The poet had no reason to worry about the stories that "sownen into synne."

If he had indeed been tempted to cynicism he would have had less faith than he seems to have had in marriage. What is love, another poet asks: 'tis not hereafter! But all through Chaucer's works there is a fairly steady loyalty to the idea of the benediction of wedded love: in the case of Blanche the Duchess, in the House of Fame and the Parliament, I think; even the Man of Law's Tale, the story of Griselda, the Melibeus, the Nun's Priest's Tale (I insist on this), the Second Nun's Tale, and the Franklin's Tale. Where husbands or wives are cheated, there is no apparent implication that the Sacrament of Matrimony is itself at fault. Even in the *Merchant's Tale*, where we have echoes of the marriage ceremony and

ironic passages on the subject of wedded bliss, the idea that by marriage one renders licentiousness legal and sexual self-indulgence moral is exposed to ruthless satire Old January explains his conduct thus:

"I have my body folly despended,
Blessed be God that it shal been amended'
For I wol be, certeyn, a wedded man,
And that anon in al the haste I kan "

E 1403-1406.

Such is Chaucer's comment on the idea that wedlock rectifies loose-living, such his respect for marriage itself. But his ideas of love are more inclusive than the question of such attachments. A rather pretty essay can some day be written by anyone who will consult and analyze the many uses of the word "love" in the Concordance of the poet's works. It occupies about as much space, in proportion to the modest amount in general allowed to other words, as the Wife of Bath herself among the pilgrims. It has chiefly to do (I think, though I have not counted the instances) with the kind of love that the Wife and Sir Thopas and Palamon and Dorigen and the rest are occupied with. But there is also reference to the "love of God" and "God's love" and not merely as an oath. Incidentally I am rather fascinated by the Concordance. I note that for one reason or another "God" occupies still more space than "love." Oaths here again contribute much, I have not yet counted how much. But even oaths, like hypocrisy, are a tribute to virtue.

In Chaucer there is love of people, love of places, love of books and much else. The world of his experience is full of it. Love of God is there too →

And loveth hym, the which that right for love
Upon a crois, oure soules for to beye,
First starf, and roos, and sit in hevene above
Troilus and Criseyde, v, 1842-1844

The first thought that came to him here is that Christ died for love. Love for Our Lady is what moves the little Clergeoun quite as much as it is love for the yet unknown *amie* that spurs Thopas to his task. "For soothly the lawe of God is the love of God," says the Parson fincly in his disquisition (I, 125), echoing the pseudo-Dionysius. But there is a vast amount, here and there in Chaucer's works, about love of people. It is in the poet himself. It is what stirs him as he talks about the young Squire's cmbroidered garb, the Clerk's twenty books, the Prioress's little dogs and her nonsense about them, the Plowman and his excellent load of manure, and all the rest of it. His characters are all the best of their kind, that point has been noticed elsewhere by a great critic. The tendency thus to display them could have been taken over from medieval romance, where the same thing pretty well holds true, and also from the poet's own taste for finish and perfection. But it also springs from the fact that he has an undoubted love for all his characters, all but one, and even there he concedes as much as he can bear to. The Pardoner is a clever rascal.

This love I speak of is no sentimental imagining. It is clearer at some times than at others, notably with the Plowman and the Franklin and the Wife of Bath. If we must be temperate we may describe it as a kindly attitude. But that is not enough. It has been perceived by many critics, and is referred to in such phrases as "sympathetic irony," "not un-

kindly cynicism," "gentle" or "genial Chaucer." If we contrast his characterizations with those that appear in other writers, say Froissart or Deschamps or Boccaccio, the difference (apart from the mere question of a fuller realism) is at once apparent. A kind of personal relationship seems to exist between the English poet and the *dramatis personae* of his narratives. He often adds to his portraits a touch of what is (or certainly seems to be) a personal estimate. He would excuse Criseyde if he could. It was "a verray, parfit, gentil knyght" Of the Doctor, "In al this world ne was ther noon hym lik." "A bettre preest I trowe that nowher noon ys." Of the Manciple:

Now is nat that of God a ful fair grace
That swich a lewed mannes wit shal pace
The wisdom of an heep of lerned men:

A 573-575.

Of the Summoner, "A bettre felawe sholde men noght fynde" And so on, and so on. Chaucer loves human nature; yes, but he loves the individual Tom and Dick and Harry — in varying degree, no doubt, but in reality. Moreover I find this kindly attitude steadily marked by that sense of proportion which is humor. And the outlook here revealed in the poet shows a positive element of belief and confidence so marked that I would call it mystical. A slight touch of that appears, for example, when more from affection than for didacticism he does his pilgrims more than justice: of the Clerk, "Noght o word spak he moore than was neede", of the Parson, "That first he wroghte, and afterward he taughte"; of the Knight, "He nevere yet no vileynye ne

sayde." Such lines, challenging exceptions as they do, suggest a complimentary glance rather than realistic portrayal.

The tone and temper of all this art is poles removed from anything that we may justly call cynical. If it is, on the other hand more nearly naïf, it is naïf only as trusting friendship, candor, belief in God, may be so described. Rather it is clear and fresh and unspoiled, like sunlight early in the morning when the day has not been used. We have only to compare the poet's work with that of Swift or Byron to see how absurd the charge of cynicism really is. As well call Browning a cynic because of his poem *The Bishop Orders his Tomb, or Mr. Sludge, or Bishop Blougram's Apology*. The man who wrote, "Lo! 'Lieth flat, and loveth Setebos!" must be a cynic! Chaucer is not irresponsible when it comes to philosophy or morals or religion. But dominant in his spirit I find — among other things — a leaning toward fun, which to the naively romantic may seem cynical, and, on the other hand, to the cynical it probably seems naively romantic. When he was young he should have been sentimental and romantic and weak, but he was not. Humor saved him. With a fuller view of humanity, with certain disillusionments no doubt, he should have become embittered; but he did not. Humor again saved him — or a healthy mind, or kindness, or whatever it is we all find irresistible in the man.

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